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MYSTERY MAGAZINE



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JUNE 325

# MIKE SHAYNE



## MYSTERY MAGAZINE

JUNE, 1977  
VOL. 40, NO. 6

NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

## THE VIOLENT ONES

By BRETT HALLIDAY

*The Miami redhead learns the hard way that an old school reunion is not always fun and games. It's a great thing to cut up old touches, but not when old hatreds refuse to play dead. This time, the games get out of hand, and the reunion sprouts a \$2,000,000 kidnapping, plus a trail of corpses that lands Mike Shayne in a lethal situation which requires all his skill to survive ..... 2 to 48*

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# THE VIOLENT ONES

by BRETT HALLIDAY

*Mr. Eagle had little trouble raising the two million to buy back his wife. The problem lay in the fact the loot was hijacked on the way to the payoff. Only then did Mr. Eagle call in Mike Shayne to unravel the mystery.*

MIKE SHAYNE HAMMERED on the painted door with a heavy fist. The sound was loud in the dimly lighted corridor of the seedy hotel-apartment building. Noise behind the purple door died instantly.

"Open up!" snapped the Miami private eye.

Silence closed in.

Shayne tensed, the hackles on the back of his neck rising.

He realized he was an open target should someone start pumping lead instead of opening the door.

His right hand slid inside his jacket, his fingers gripped the butt of the holstered .45. Then the husky voice of an unseen male beyond the door said, "Yeah . . . just a minute."

Shayne relaxed slightly, dropping an empty hand from

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the coat. He shot a side glance toward the woman who hovered in the open doorway of the apartment to his left. She looked taut. Her bony body slightly hunched, her black eyes round and unblinking as she watched him. He sensed that she, too, was surprised by the reply. It had not been expected.

Shayne heard the squeak of a turning doorknob, the clink of a chain lock. It sounded as if the apartment occupant were having difficulty working the chain from its cradle.

Then the door swung wide and Shayne got a brief glimpse of a pink ski mask before a fist smashed into his nose.

The detective reeled back with the blinding blow and crashed into the wall behind him. He heard the woman yelp and felt blood spurt from his nose, tasting it instantly. He cursed.

*"Stupid!"* Years of bird-dogging, of skinning knuckles, of banging skulls, of kicking, gouging, yanking hair and ears, of pinching nerves and throwing wicked elbow blows, of alley-fighting with the toughs and the slicks alike—a man should learn—a man won by anticipating the unexpected.

He had dropped his guard. Now he had a bloody—perhaps broken—nose and was slumped

against a wall while a masked foe fled.

Out of the corner of his eye, Shayne saw the masked man skid on the thin carpeting, disappear down a stairwell. The redhead pushed from the wall and charged down the corridor. Turning into the stairwell, he launched his body in a long leap downward to the landing, his hands smacking the wall to break the plunge. He whirled. The masked man was already off the stairway and flying across the narrow lobby toward the street door.

The woman appeared above Shayne. He waved her off and danced on down the concave steps, legging it on long strides past the empty lobby desk. He shot out the street door into the mild Thursday night. A startled man and woman stood rooted in his path. They were staring down the shadowed sidewalk to the detective's right.

Shayne tried to curve around the couple but, as if on signal, they leaped back and Shayne was forced to spin across the walk. He slammed against a dented sedan parked at the curbing immediately in front of his Buick.

The couple fled into the night as the redhead bounced off the sedan. The woman had come out of the hotel now. She moved toward him. He put her aside.

"Stay where you are," he

He pivoted as a shot was fired from the alley entrance down the block. There was a tiny flash, a crack of sound, then the whine of a slug. The woman cried out, went down on her knees.

Shayne jerked her into the space between the sedan and the Buick, kept her down, protecting most of her with his large body.

"You hit?" he asked.

"No . . . no . . ." she stammered.

He sneaked a look along the sidewalk toward the alley entrance. Nothing. He pulled the woman to her feet and across the walk, propelling her toward the hotel door.

"*Inside!*" he told her, moving toward the alley in a crouched, weaving run. He drew the .45 from its holster. But no more shots were fired at him.

The detective pressed against the building wall as he reached the alley entrance. Blood continued to run from his nose. He cursed and spat, wiping the stream with the back of his gun hand. Then Shayne risked a look into the alley.

It was a deep well of darkness with a slab of pale street light at the faraway exit. No light in the alley, nothing moving against the exit light. Shayne sucked a breath and

moved into the darkness. A slug ricocheted off the wall near his head. Brick chips stung his cheek.

He crouched, staring into the darkness. The whine of a faraway siren sounded. The sound of the first gunshot had sent someone in the area diving for a phone, calling the cops.

Then, about halfway down the alley, a shadow materialized and raced away from him swiftly in a zig-zag run. The detective triggered a shot, aiming for the legs. He saw the shadow stagger, then disappear into wall blackness. He moved out, running low. Another shot whined past Shayne.

He hugged the wall, still moving, and crashed into a row of garbage cans, going down on his chest and hands in a clatter of rolling metal.

Looking up, he saw the shadow far down the alley racing away from him. Its owner raced out of the alley and turned left down the sidewalk. Shayne leaped to his feet and was immediately spotlighted by headlights. The car had entered the alley behind him. It came roaring toward him.

The redhead plastered his body against the wall, rising up on his toes, his arms wide, his hands up, the .45 held high. The fleeing man had an accomplice.



The car skidded to a stop in front of Shayne sending two garbage cans rolling on down the alley. Shayne could feel the fender of the car against his thighs.

It was his second brush with the kidnappers within ten hours.

## II

THURSDAY WAS A WARM, bright day, the kind the Miami Chamber of Commerce liked to see in live telecasts. Shayne sat slouched in the swivel chair behind his desk in his Flagler Street office. The chair was turned away from the desk and he was staring out a window that overlooked the city.

Behind him, the door of his private office was wide open and the outer office was vacant. Lucy Hamilton, his secretary, had gone to lunch with a girl friend, to be followed by shopping.

The detective was scheduled to meet Tim Rourke, his longtime newspaper pal, at The Beef House in thirty minutes. It was time to get tracking, but for the moment he was enjoying the silence of the office, the brightness of the day, plus the knowledge that he had nothing pressing that afternoon. He had just wrapped up a rough case Wednesday night and he felt he owed himself this day of mental

and physical relaxation. It felt good.

The detective glanced at his watch. He was to meet Rourke at one o'clock. No business—just a friendly lunch together, some light banter, a few chuckles. He hoisted himself to his feet, locked the office and took the elevator to the ground floor. Outside, the brightness of the sun brought a squint to his gray eyes, but he sucked the warm air gratefully. It was a great day and The Beef House on Miami Avenue was not that far away. He'd walk.

He turned with the flow of pedestrian traffic and moved to the intersection, where he stood on the curb at the head of the crowd, waiting for a traffic light change. A white Pinto eased up in front of him and stopped inches from his toes. The driver's voice floated up to him from an open passenger window.

"Get in, Mr. Shayne."

From his height, the detective could not see the driver. He bent and looked through the open window as the light changed and the pedestrians began to split around both ends of the Pinto. He stared at an expensively dressed black behind the steering wheel, both hands on the wheel. The man was smooth-skinned and impassive with large dark glasses



hiding his eyes. He looked in his late twenties. Shayne did not know him.

"In!" the black repeated.

"Get lost," Shayne replied.

The black took his right hand from the steering wheel and slipped it inside his casual jacket. Shayne tensed. He had locked up his .45 in the office. He didn't need a gun for a lunch date with Tim Rourke.

The black took a white envelope from his pocket, opened it and spread the corners of the money so that Shayne had a clear view. The detective counted ten hundred-dollar bills. The black put the envelope on the seat beside him.

"My employer wants to rap, man," he said. "No sweat. You listen, you don't dig, five bills stay in your threads. You dig, the thou is yours and there's more bread in the basket. Fair?"

Shayne got into the Pinto, stuffed the envelope into his pocket as the black expertly eased the car into the glut of traffic.

"Names?" said Shayne.

"Ralph Eagle the Third is my man," the black replied. "You dig?"

"Nope."

The black shrugged slightly, concentrated on driving. "He's big, but he's quiet. You can hear about him, you don't have



to. But he's heavy in bread and savvy, Shayne. Investments. Right now he needs help—*your* kind. He can afford you and he needs a shamus who has an in with the cops and an in with some of the rougher trade. He needs some corners cut—*fast*."

"How come?"

"Mr. Eagle will tell you."

"You got a name?"

"Sure, man—West."

Shayne reached over and patted down the black. West almost smiled before shaking his head. "Not me, Shayne. No ticket—no need for heat."

"Uh-huh," said the detective, settling back. "This boss of yours—I came recommended, I assume."

"Oh, yeah."

"By whom?"

"By me."

"You know me from where, West?"

"From a dude we both know."

"Who?" Shayne was curious.

West named a man high in the upper half-world of Miami Beach—Edward Edmont, a speculator—for whom the red-head had once solved a nasty problem. The black's replies checked out, and the detective decided to play along—for the time being.

Miami has its warped and tilted ghetto structures, its myriad of colorful two and three bedroom bungalows, its showcase estates. Ralph Eagle III lived in none of them. His was a small spread no super-market manager could afford to purchase. On the other hand, few millionaires would give it a second blink.

The house and grounds were square and neat. Behind the house was a small patio area, a small blue-water swimming pool, a scattering of palm trees and a four-stall carport. On that early Thursday afternoon, there were a small Caddy and two medium-priced GM sedans in the stalls. West put the

Pinto in the empty slot and motioned Shayne to get out.

As they moved through the sunshine onto the patio, a short and compact man came from the house. His dark hair was trimmed in a fresh bur cut and sprinkled with gray, but his face and skin were unlined. He looked forty and healthy, dressed in an open-necked sports shirt, dark slacks and polished loafers. He walked with a deep limp to his right.

"I am Ralph Eagle, Mr. Shayne," he said crisply, extending a hand. "Thank you for coming."

His grip was firm. He waved the detective to a red umbrellaed patio table. West remained off to the side at another table.

Shayne got out a cigaret, lit, it, looked for an ashtray, found none. He fooled with the match in his fingertips.

"Please, Mr. Shayne?" said Eagle. "I am a non-smoker."

"And I smoke."

Eagle lifted an eyebrow, hesitated, then said, "Challenge?" He sounded mildly surprised.

"I'm told, Mr. Eagle, that you need me," replied Shayne, drawing on the cigaret and slouching in the webbed chair. "I don't need you. And I don't like your man's approach. Have him run me back downtown—and it won't cost you five bills."

Eagle looked at West. The

black got up from the chair, his sunglasses glistening at Shayne for a few seconds. Shayne saw West's lips tighten as he looked at his employer. "You need his kind, Mr. Eagle."

He turned toward the carport, began to move out, then returned to Shayne and stood over him, his glistening glasses threatening as he stared down. "But don't press things too far, huh, man?"

He didn't wait for a reply but moved out to the carport. Shayne sat up straight in the chair, said, "Okay, Eagle, your boy says Edmont told you about me. What do you want?"

"Edmont told me you were tough—which was why West approached you the way he did. But you need to understand something from the beginning, Mr. Shayne. I'm tough here, just as tough as any man." He tapped his skull with a stiff forefinger. "But, by birth, I do not enjoy that equalizer here." He tapped his body. "I have a defective hip. Some days—like today—I can move reasonably well. But there are other days. And that is why West is with me. He wouldn't be if I didn't have total confidence in his mental and physical abilities. Matt West is often me—in body. What I'm saying is—"

The redhead interrupted with a wave of the cigaret, "I under-

stand. I can smoke because West says it's okay. That won't do, Eagle!"

Shayne rose, dropped the envelope of money on the table.

"Shayne!"

The redhead whirled, stared at West returning from the carport.

"Cool it, man," West said softly. "We got use for a bulldozer-type. Tell him, Mr. Eagle." Shayne detected a hint of pleading in his tone as West put an automobile ashtray on the table.

Eagle was tense and Shayne had a hunch that inside his host's head wheels were spinning, sorting, categorizing, searching and producing with the cold composure of a computer.

"All right, Mr. Shayne," Eagle said finally. "Sit down, please. My wife has been kidnapped. I have paid a two million dollar ransom. My wife was to be returned to this house by noon today. She has not been returned and I have not heard from the kidnappers."

### III

THE SNATCH, ACCORDING to Ralph Eagle, had occurred on Monday morning. His wife, Brenda, had kept a ten o'clock dental appointment. But she had not appeared for a 12:30

luncheon date with a female friend. Eagle had not been aware anything was amiss until he received a ransom demand around five o'clock that Monday afternoon.

The caller had demanded two million dollars. He had given Eagle Tuesday and Wednesday to put the money together. It was to be delivered—on later instructions—Wednesday night. The kidnapper had threatened to kill Brenda Eagle if Eagle called the police or F.B.I.

Eagle displayed a billfold photograph of his wife. She was attractive, thick dark hair framing a triangular face. She looked twenty-eight to thirty years old.

"She was abducted in the parking lot at the medical complex," said Eagle. "We know that much."

Shayne shot a look at West. Dark glasses glistened back at him. "After we got the word," West said, "I started to backtrack. I found the Cad—it's her wheels—in the parking lot at the complex. It's the Cantamar on Biscayne. I checked inside the dental office. She had kept her appointment—but she didn't show for lunch with her friend. I also checked the friend."

Eagle had put the two million dollar ransom together by the time he received the second

phone call from the kidnappers. The money was packed in an airlines travel bag, as instructed. He had received the call at five p.m. Wednesday and had been told to deliver the bag at 10 p.m. at a specific ticket window in the Spencer High School football stadium. He had been given a route and timetable to follow from his home to the stadium. He had followed instructions—and West had trailed him.

Following the 5 p.m. call, West—on his own—had taken a drive out to the Spencer High stadium and immediately had become suspicious. The stadium was enclosed by a high wire fence. All of the ticket windows were inside the fence within the outer walls of the concrete structure. Some of the gates in the fence could be scaled, but inside a man could easily be trapped at the drop sight.

Add to that, the specific driving timetable given to Eagle. West had suspected the pickup would actually be made during the drive to the stadium.

He had not relayed this thinking to his employer. Rather, with Eagle's departure from the house, he had become a distant shadow, prepared to leap forward instantly.

Eagle had been waylaid at an intersection stoplight. A car had slid up beside him. The

driver had been alone and masked and had waved a gun at him, demanding the money. Eagle had passed the bag and then been told to drive on. He had, and the other car had turned down a side avenue immediately. West trailed it, hoping to be led to Brenda Eagle. But he had received a jolt. The man with the money had another shadow, a sedan that whipped around West and settled in behind the first car. West had dropped back, watching intently.

"It was hijacking, Shayne," West said flatly.

"Okay, go on," the detective replied, lighting a fresh cigaret.

It was tricky, but West had managed to trail the two cars to a rundown hotel, the Pickering, on Orms between 74th and 76th. The first car stopped at the curb immediately in front of the hotel and the driver had leaped out and dashed inside. He had been carrying the airline bag.

The second car had slid into a curb parking slot before reaching the hotel lights, and a man had bailed out of it and moved swiftly along the sidewalk and into the hotel. West had whipped into the parking lot of a beer joint across the street from the hotel and settled down in his heap to watch.

West said, "I got action,

Shayne, in maybe eight—nine minutes. I'm sitting there, eyeballing, and then here comes this dude, boiling out of an alley maybe halfway down the block. He bolts straight to the wheels the hijacker used, but he isn't carrying an airline bag now—and he doesn't quite make it to the wheels.

"The second dude comes out of the hotel and braces him. They wrestle, then there's this gunshot and the hijacker goes down. The dude stands over him for a second or two and then flies. His buddy has their wheels in action and he pulls up front. The dude dives into the front seat. They cut a trail.

"I'm wheeling out of my parking slot to sail after them, but I hit a piece of bad luck. Some schmo is turning into the lot just as I'm bouncing out. We bump bumpers. By the time we get straightened around, those other cats are long gone. Nothing for me to do then but head here."

"No interest in who the guy on the sidewalk might be?" said Shayne.

"He didn't stay down, man. He got up, staggered to the hotel. A dame inside reached out and yanked him in."

"What about the bag? No interest in it either?"

"Hey, Shayne," the black said softly, "I'm not a fuzz army

down there with paper and buzzers that give me an okay to splinter doors. I'm just a citizen. A guy probably could kick out windows and not get too many beefs in the Pickering. It's a large building—and the bag is *small*. What am I supposed to do? Go room to room until the bulls finally land on me?"

Ralph Eagle interrupted. "Mr. Shayne, the money is not my concern. My concern is my wife. Where is she? Why haven't I heard from her abductors? What—"

"It sounds like the kidnapers didn't get their payoff, Eagle."

Eagle nodded somberly. "That's what frightens me."

"It should," Shayne said.

Eagle jumped. "Do you think they might kill Brenda?"

"Or have."

Eagle shuddered.

"It's a possibility you have to face," Shayne said.

West broke in. "Shayne, we're riding the possibility she hasn't been hit. These cats didn't get their hooks on the two mill, but they saw Mr. Eagle deliver—even if it was to a hijacker. They know he was coming on square!"

Shayne stood up, moved around. "Come on, West, get your head straight. Their caper went sour. Somebody lifted

their loot—which raises a couple of possibilities.

"Either they had loose tongues about their action, or they figure your boss set up his own hijacking. They'd given him a timetable. There was a reason—they wanted to trail him, be damn sure he was alone, damn sure no cops were floating around on the fringes. So maybe you two boys took advantage of the timetable, too."

Shayne let the words hang, stared hard at the two men, who stood like stone. "Did you?" he asked. "Did you play cute?"

"No," snapped Eagle.

"Shayne," said West, his cheek muscles dancing, "Mr. Eagle paid. No games at this end. Now he wants you to find his wife. Simple?"

"As long as he understands I could bring him a corpse."

"You're rough, man," West said, shaking his head. He touched the dark glasses with a forefinger. "But we understand. What do a couple of snatch men do with a hostage the day after two mill has been yanked from under their noses? We've discussed the scene and we've got bad vibes about it."

Eagle suddenly dropped a flat palm against the metal patio table. The crack produced by flesh being slammed against

metal was almost like a gunshot. "Gentlemen," he said, taking command again, "I want my wife found—alive or otherwise."

"Cops?" asked Shayne.

Eagle held his stare. "You try first, Mr. Shayne. I want people stepped on if necessary."

"Here, Shayne," said West, taking a small spiral notebook from his coat pocket. He tossed the notebook to the detective. "Maybe it's a starting point."

#### IV

SHAYNE FLIPPED OPEN the notebook. Two sets of numbers had been penciled on the top sheet of the pad. He studied them briefly, shot West a look. "Auto plate numbers?"

"The top one belongs to the heap I lost, the one with the two guys in it. It was an Olds, this year's model. The other I got from the hijacker's wheels. It was a sixty-eight Pontiac."

"Need a phone," said the detective.

They entered the house. Eagle stopped off at a teapot in the spacious and polished kitchen. "Tea, Mr. Shayne?"

Shayne waved him off. He and West continued into a front room that was elegantly appointed and immaculately clean. West pointed to a phone, then caught the detective's

arm. The dark glasses hung on Shayne.

"What gives, friend?" he said softly. "You were coming down heavy on my main man out there."

Shayne removed the hand. "He needs to have all this in perspective," he replied. "Take off those rose-colored glasses he's wearing."

"He's scared," said West. "He's been scared since Brenda turned up missing. It's waffled his thinking. I wanted you right from the top, Shayne. I don't know that you could've helped, man, but at least you've got some savvy about these things. But Mr. Eagle wouldn't listen—until I got back here last night and told him about the shooting. That shook his tree."

"If I take this case, West, he pays the tab, that's all. Got it?"

The Negro dipped a hand into an inside coat pocket, removed a folded check. "Four thou. You've got one in cash. Grand total, five. Flat fee."

Shayne took the check, kept West pinned with his stare. "And the same for you, pal," he said. "No interference—unless I call for you."

"So we're on the same burner," the black nodded.

Shayne telephoned Auto Division at Police Headquarters. The Oldsmobile had gone on



the stolen sheet around 11 p.m. Wednesday, had been removed Thursday morning. A man and his wife had gone to a movie Wednesday night, had come out, found their heap missing from the parking lot. The car had been found in another movie lot Thursday morning.

The 1968 Pontiac was registered to a Lea Rona Woodward, 7530 Orms, #24—and what the hell was going on with that heap? This was the second request of the day about it. Detective Donovan up at Homicide had called down earlier that morning about the same car.

Shayne put the phone together, stood frowning in thought for a few seconds. Eagle reentered the room. He sat on the edge of a couch, saucer and teacup on a low table in front of him. He was watching intently but remained silent.

Shayne called Ray Zoner at City Morgue. Zoner had received a shooting victim around midnight. Male Caucasian, 29. Calvin Arthur Lane had been brought in from a cop run to the 7500 block on Orms. He had been shot in the neck, one wound, and the slug had severed the jugular. Lane had leaked most of his blood by the time Zoner got him. It was Detective Donovan's trick up in Homicide.

Shayne broke off the call, stood with a large thumb holding down the phone button, his thoughts clicking. It smelled as if Calvin Arthur Lane had been driving Lea Rona Woodward's wheels Wednesday night and the other two boys had plucked the Olds from a movie parking lot.

He used the phone book, checked the Pickering Hotel. Its address was 7530 Orms. West had said a woman helped Lane into the hotel after he was shot. Had that woman been Lea Rona Woodward? If it had been, what was her tie to Lane?

Shayne knew Sergeant Donovan, a veteran Homicide detective. They were acquaintances, no more. It was one of the many gratuities that wafted like streamers from a main pole, the pole in this case being Will Gentry, Chief of the Miami police force. Shayne and Gentry were long-time friends.

It was a relationship that ran deep, having been born and solidified in mutual respect during years of working together when their paths crossed. Donovan was an offshoot of that friendship. He and Shayne had intersected here and there, too, Donovan and Will Gentry on the prowl for law and order, Shayne on the prowl for himself and/or a client or prospective client.

Shayne then punch-dialed Homicide Division, caught Donovan at his desk in the squad room. Donovan expressed mild surprise at Shayne's interest in a two-bit shooting.

"Might figure in something I'm working on," said Shayne. "Two-bit?"

Donovan sighed. "The deceased was Calvin Arthur Lane, Mike, also known as 'Bo' Lane, a dime comic, a hot dog in small bistros when he worked. Which he ain't been doing recently, the way we hear. Help?"

"Not really. Any idea about who hit him?"

"Naw."

"Or why?"

"Maybe he told a sick joke on a street corner and triggered a kook. That's where we are. What have you got?"

"A missing woman—probably involved with a guy, maybe more than one, but this Lane doesn't sound like he's in her ballpark."

"Do we know about this missing woman?"

"Hubby may be around to see you boys in a day or two—if she doesn't come home."

"Okay, Mike."

Mike Shayne put the phone together, stood scowling in thought. Homicide wasn't exactly busting its tail on the Bo Lane killing. He glanced at

West and Eagle. Eagle's eyes were bright. West's dark glasses were two slabs of unmoving black. Both men sat as if they had received a heavy electrical jolt.

"Something?" snapped the redhead.

"Who is Lane?" asked West, cheek muscles suddenly dancing again.

"Calvin Arthur Lane, also know as Bo Lane, nightclub funny man, according to..."

He let the words dribble off as he saw the look pass between West and Eagle.

"We know him," West said flatly.

## V

THE TWELFTH ANNUAL REUNION OF Miami's Spencer High School, Class of '64, had been held the previous Sunday at the Eagle home. Bo Lane had attended. It was his first reunion in the twelve years.

"Can I take it, Mr. Eagle?" West interrupted.

Eagle hesitated, then nodded.

Matt West had also been a member of the class. In high school, Brenda Eagle, Bo Lane and a kid named Karl Gunderson had been very close. When you saw one, you usually saw the others. They did not date, as such—they were simply close friends. And they had been to-

gether on Sunday, reliving the old days. Gunderson had come in from Reno. It was also his first reunion.

But the day had turned sour. Bo Lane had arrived half smashed, had continued to drink, had become obnoxious. Other guests had complained. "Gunner" Gunderson had brought along a Reno friend, a man named "Ace" Fletcher. Fletcher and some of the guests had become involved in a poker game and Fletcher had been accused of cheating. He had been asked to leave. Gunderson had come to his defense and Bo Lane had sided belligerently with Gunderson and Fletcher. Finally, Eagle had escorted all three from the grounds.

Shayne stood tugging an earlobe between thumb and forefinger. He was scowling.

West frowned. "Whatcha thinking, man?"

"Mrs. Eagle could have mentioned her Monday morning dental appointment..." mused the detective.

"I suppose," the black nodded. "Idle conversation."

"And Bo Lane was the hijacker."

"Looks like, yeah."

"How come you didn't recognize him—or did you, and for some reason, just failed to mention it?"

"Off my back, shamus," West

said. "That street down there isn't exactly bathed in spotlights. And I was in a parking lot some distance away. I saw a dude bail out of wheels and dive into the hotel. Later, I saw the same dude flying down the street, coming from an alley back to the wheels. Then he got hit."

"Think a minute on this one, West," said Mike Shayne. "It was the same man—the guy who went into the hotel and the guy who came from the alley? You're positive?"

West nodded. "Yeah, I'm sure of that."

"The shadows couldn't have screwed you up on that, too?"

West stiffened. "Hey... shove the bites, huh? You'n me are in the same pocket on this one, man."

Shayne shrugged. He wasn't sure. "Okay. I need a ride back downtown."

"Mr. Shayne," interrupted Eagle from the couch. "What are you thinking?"

"About Bo Lane, a street-corner comic, who clipped you for two million bucks, then got hit. He was in from somewhere, Eagle. He had a pipeline to the kidnappers or he had a role in a bigger picture. Either way, someone else is involved. So who? A couple of Reno boys named Gunderson and Fletcher?"

Eagle and West stared at the redhead, both showing surprise.

"Gunderson and Fletcher are pals," continued Shayne. "Once Lane and Gunderson were pals. Lane, Gunderson and Fletcher were here last Sunday—you bounced them. Add up?"

"Ridiculous!" breathed Eagle.

"Maybe," said Shayne. "But a jumping-off place—unless you've got names of some other prospective kidnappers tucked away somewhere back in your skull."

Eagle picked up his teacup, sipped. His hand was shaking. "No-no," he said.

"Let's go, Shayne," said West.

Outside, walking toward the carport, West continued, "You're coming on scary, man. Brenda would know Bo and Gunner. Maybe not Fletcher, but Bo and Gunner? Yeah, man, she could be blindfolded, taped, you name it, but she'd *know* those two dudes. She'd *sense* who they were. Something would drop somewhere. And they'd have to waste her, man. Two mill or no two mill, sooner or later, they'd have to blow her away."

"Un-huh." Shayne nodded thoughtfully as he dropped onto the seat of the Pinto. "Probably."

West put the car in motion. As they rolled down the drive to the street, the redhead went



on, "On the cop sheets, Lane was a small potato—a comic who wasn't funny, who picked up a buck or two here and there in the holes, who hadn't worked lately. You got anything to add?"

"No," replied the black. "I saw the dude last Sunday for the first time since high school. I'd forgotten him till he showed."

"Already on juice."

"Oh, yeah, man. Juice was his baby, had been for years. You could see it in his eyes, his skin. Sober, he probably quivered like a spaced-out junkie."

"What was Gunderson's pedigree in high school?"

"Gunner?" West registered mild surprise, then his lips tightened. "All-American boy, athlete, popular, most likely to succeed, that kind of jazz."

"You don't sound like you were one of his cheerleaders."

"No way, man. I've got black skin. Gunner's got a red neck."

"Last Sunday?"

West lifted his hand, made a fishtail movement. "We nodded, slapped five, no more. I think he was surprised I still exist. I *know* it yanked his cord when he found out I work for Mr. Eagle, around Brenda."

"How come?"

West held up three fingers. They were tight together. "Gunner, Brenda and Bo. I told yuh. Top of the heap in the Class of sixty-four. Everybody wanted in, nobody got in. It was just them, the Trio. But I'm in now, man—at least with one of them. And I'm still black."

"And then you bounced Gunner and his two pals for Eagle."

"Naw. Mr. Eagle handled the scene beautifully, Shayne. That's me you see standing in the background, not even lifting a pinkie."

"What else do I see? An angry Gunner?"

"You see Mr. Cool, redhead. He's smiling."

"Like a big snake—a cobra?"

"Hey! You got a way with words!"

"Bo?"

"Mr. Eagle could've been yanking out his fingernails. Bo wouldn't have felt a thing. The dude was bombed!"

"Ace Fletcher?"

"Frothy, but no trouble. Gunner had a heavy arm on him."

"So do I put them in a package, Matt? Make then kidnapers because they got heaved out of a high-school class reunion?"

"I've been thinking about that, and there's no way." West shook his head vigorously. "Oh, you can put 'em in a package, yeah, man. That part might fly. But don't hang it on a heaveho. Get something more gaudy—like colors."

"Colors?"

"Purple and yellow, Spencer High's colors in the yearbook. Once we all wore purple and yellow. But today Brenda wears green. G-r-e-e-n, man—courtesy of Mr. Ralph Emmerson Eagle III. My main man has more bank accounts than you have fingers and toes, Shayne. A couple of flashes in town from Reno just might get high on prospects alone."

"Un-huh," agreed the detective thoughtfully. "Could be." He tugged the earlobe. Then he

ame in from a different direction: "Eagle is your main man," he said. "Is Brenda Eagle your main woman?"

The dark glasses glowered at him. "I ain't digging that." Vest sounded almost apprehensive.

"In Eagle's presence, it's Mrs. Eagle—away from him, it's Brenda," Shayne pressed. "Reaction?"

"Oh, Christ!" West swelled for a few seconds, his fingers working against the steering wheel. He stared straight ahead, but Shayne had a hunch he wasn't seeing the street.

"That's habit," West finally said. His voice was flat. He obviously was struggling to keep control of himself. "I can't explain it no more than that—habit. Look, I was down—a bad rap. She got me up." He licked his lips, continued. "When I got out of the slammer, nowhere to go, nothing to do, no bread. My parole man, a good man, was working on it, but coming up zeroes.

"So I started nosing myself. Shayne, I went around to see all the cats I ever knew in my life, including old high school buddies I hadn't seen since graduation. I didn't go to Brenda because I'd lost track of her. She could've been in India, didn't know. But another guy new, a guy here in town who

couldn't help me, but he sicced Brenda on me.

"She came around. Her husband needed a man. I might fit the ticket. I went to see him—I fitted. I've been with him two years now, and I ain't trading—not even if I had the chance to become the first black president of the United States!"

"Who's your parole man, Matt?"

"A brother named Paul Hoffman. Want me to drop you at his place?"

"Naw. I know Paul. But I don't know your boss—a guy who can put together two million clams in two days."

"What's to know?"

"He doesn't live that kind of bread."

"Big bread man has to live in a palace?"

Shayne ran a thumbnail along his jawline. "Most do."

"Mr. Eagle's comfortable."

"Tight with the buck?"

"Careful with the buck, Shayne. Tight and careful, there's a diff. In addition, Mr. Eagle is very sharp in the head."

"So if he's careful, how come he isn't tearing up sod over the two mill? I can understand how the money might be secondary, but he seems to be passing off the loss as if he'd been stuck for an extra nickel at a pizza parlor."

"All Mr. Eagle wants is his wife returned unharmed," said West. "He can get another two million. He can't get another Brenda."

"He and Mrs. Eagle get along okay?"

West sighed. "Man, you are a suspicious dude!"

"It's where I live the hardest, Matt."

"They click," West said bluntly. "Brenda and Mr. Eagle mesh. You dig?"

"She looks younger."

"So? Look, both were previously hitched. Mr. Eagle's first woman died. Brenda and her first man split. I dunno why. But if you think there might be a hangover, go ask the cat. Last I knew, he still was in town. Name's Charles Pearce. He's a newspaper writer."

They had arrived at Shayne's Flagler Street office building. West braked the Pinto at the curbing, fixed his dark glasses on the detective. "Dig deep and fast on this one, man," he said.

Shayne was halfway out of the car. "Because?"

"'Cause if I have to go to Brenda's funeral, your fuzz buddies are gonna think this town got itself a gangland war!"

## VI

TIM ROURKE HAD CALLED. He wondered how come Shayne

had missed their lunch date. Pert Lucy Hamilton, Shayne's secretary, was curious, too. Shayne tabled Ralph Eagle's five thousand dollars for Lucy to get to the bank before closing and then they went into his private office, where they spent forty-five minutes opening a new case file. Lucy frowned over her notes when the detective had finished speculating and summarizing.

"I think you are going to miss some meals on this one Michael," she said.

He sat forward and ruffled his hair. "See if you can get Lin Black in Reno while I make another call."

He looked up a number and called Paul Hoffman, the parole man, and asked for Matt West's case history.

"Damn," breathed Hoffman. "is the brother in trouble?"

"Surprise?"

"West has good marks, Mike. Reports regularly, is employed quiet, no complaints. A rare man for me. I think he might be one of our truly rehabilitated boys. But now you try to tell me —."

"No beefs here. I'm working on a thing for his employer and I just met West. Trying to get a line on the guy, that's all. I could get his package pulled at the cop shop, but figured you'd be up to date and



quicker. What was his rap?"

Hoffman sighed. "A bummer in his opinion, natch—but in West's case, I might buy. He went up on an abduction count. Gal was Caucasian. West supposedly was taking her out of town. Her pappa and the police caught them. West's story was he and the gal were cutting for Mexico to marry, but the gal changed her tune facing pappa. She claimed she was being held against her will.

"Okay, it was her against West. West lost and got his lumps. But, hell, she did, too, eventually, in a way. Also pappa. She hit the drug scene, became a dancer in a few porn clubs, finally took the dive or was tossed from a rich man's yacht. Pappa went down, too. Killed his wife and himself in one of these muder-suicide things. Grief."

"Only one count on West?"

"Yep."

"Okay, Paul. Thanks. I'll keep you posted."

Shayne sat back in his chair, frowned deeply, his thumb and forefinger working the earlobe. West had done time on an abduction charge. And his current employer's wife had been kidnapped.

Was Matt West playing games with all of them?

Shayne put together a hypothetical action. West and

Bo Lane are a team. West makes the snatch, Lane makes the pickup of the ransom. The pickup is not a hijacking—it's planned. West wants Lane in that role just in case Eagle—out of earshot—has called in cops.

"If cops land at the drop site, they get Lane. Sure, Lane will bleat, but West has a running start. He can dive into a hole. On the other hand, if no cops show, Lane can be wasted and West is flying with two mill.

Okay, no cops land. But Lane goes cute on West. From somewhere down in the depths of his booze-soaked brain, the comic gets a flash. *He* can cut with the two million. So he drives back to the hotel-apartment, but instead of waiting for West to show, he stashes the money somewhere in the building, goes out a back door, comes down an alley and attempts to fly while West is inside.

The only trouble is—West spots him scooting along the sidewalk. *Bang!* Lane is wasted. It could have been accidental. West is out the money. Or it could have been intentional. The only voice to implicate West is silenced, the stashed two million be damned...

Shayne shook his head and went to the window, stared out at the city without seeing it.

If the snatch was West's caper, and if his action got screwed up, why would he tell Eagle to hire a shamus? Why would he throw in a couple of red herring like Gunderson and Fletcher to keep things alive?

And the kicker—where would he come up with the license number of a stolen Olds if the Olds *wasn't* involved?

None of it dovetailed with blowing Bo Lane if West was the kidnapper-killer.

Shayne banged a fist against his thigh and turned back to his desk. West wasn't home free with a Mr. Clean tag in the detective's book, but there were other irons to be poked into the fire.

Lucy Hamilton still had not turned up Liz Black in Reno. Shayne put out five more telephone calls, talked to three of his parties. He was fishing in different water now. Ralph Eagle III was a man of considerable wealth. And a two-million-dollar snatch was a big caper.

Add—the payoff could have been hijacked after all.

Add—if either or both ends of that little scenario had been masterminded from out of the shadowy depths of the real Third World—the shadowy underworld—there were some blood pressures boiling now. It was possible a contract or two

might already have been let. But the import to a private eye was the smells.

Smells could be drifting into the gray No Man's Land between under and top worlds—the ghost area where informers hang their hats.

Shayne came up empty. No smells. But he got radar beams working. He'd check out the sweeps later.

Lucy finally flicked fingers through the open doorway between the two offices. "Liz Black is on the line, Michael. Holding."

"Mike Shayne!" exploded the cheery voice in his ear. "You caught me between pregnancy and abortion! Paternity suit in one court, malpractice in another, and I've got both defendants! But you know I'll drop it all for you, darling! Coming out?"

She had dated Shayne. Her father had been a close friend, a helluvan attorney, one of Miami's best. And enough of father was in daughter's blood to make her an expert in the courtroom, too. Long ago, she had gone to Reno on a vacation. She had never returned to Miami.

"Need a line on a couple of Reno boys, Liz. Probably on the raunchy side."

"Shoot. I know a bloodhound or two."

She listened, then asked, "And where and when do I call you, Mike? I should have something by evening."

"Evening? That's what to you westerners? Six, eight, ten, your time? I'll have to call you, Liz. I'm going to be moving on this end."

"Make it six at my home, Mike. And be prompt, will you? I've got a heavy number going for seven—Cocktails, dinner, the works. With a judge, who's a real guy underneath all that black robe."

She laughed cheerily.

Shayne's mouth curved in a brief crooked smile. Liz Black was his kind of woman. "Good hunting," he said.

He dropped the phone into its cradle, unlocked and yanked open a filing cabinet drawer, took out the shoulder holster with its pocketed .45, strapped on the rig. In the outer office, he said, "Probably won't be back in till sometime tomorrow, Angel."

Lucy touched a pencil eraser against the tip of her nose. "Be careful, Michael." It was all she said.

Matt West had given him the Pickering Hotel. He found it to be at 7539 Orms, the address the auto registration boys had given him for the 1968 Pontiac Bo Lane had been driving. Two little things finally added. The



Pickering, however, turned out to be a slight deviation.

## VII

THE PICKERING NO LONGER was just a hotel. The rooms were currently termed apartments, according to a rumped fat man who sat behind a former hotel lobby desk and professed to be the building manager.

Bo Lane? The guy who'd got shot? Yeah, he'd lived there. Had Number 26.

Lea Woodward? Sure, she was in Number 24.

She own wheels? Un-huh, a clunker Pontiac.

Is she in? Hell, dunno. Go up and bang on her door. If she's in, she'll open up.

Lea Woodward was in. But she hung between painted door and jamb, pale, bone-thin, sloppy in jeans and faded

sweatshirt, blocking entry to the apartment. She looked thirty and in frenzied need of a belt of whisky, a shot of H, a sniff of coke or a doctor. Her nervous system was turned up to high voltage. Shayne had the feeling that if he could peel back her skin he'd find an intricate network of tiny white-hot wires.

"I-I've . . . already talked to the police," she managed when he flashed his ticket. She started to fade out of the doorway.

He put a palm against the painted wood. "I'm not police. I'm private."

It stopped her. She stared at him. She was short, the top of her head level with his jaw. She looked frightened and perplexed.

"And I know Bo Lane used your car last night, honey," he continued. "Pontiac, sixty-eight." He rattled off the license plate number.

She flinched, stepped back, her eyes round as quarters. "But the police didn't say anything about . . ."

She let it dribble off as Shayne entered the apartment, eased the door shut behind him, put his shoulders against it.

He inventoried swiftly. The room was small. There were a cheap couch and chair, a narrow refrigerator in one corner,

a hot plate, two windows in the wall to his right. Straight ahead was an open door. He went to it, looked into a bath. Beyond was another open door, revealing a double bed and a dresser. Two windows in the front wall there, too. The apartment had once been adjoining hotel rooms with bath between.

Shayne faced the woman again. She hovered near the refrigerator, taut as stretched wire.

"You got a jug in the box, honey? Go on, have a slug. Get unwound."

"I . . . don't drink."

He shrugged and went to the windows, looked down on Orms Street. The entrance to the Pickering was immediately below him. Across the street was a squat white-stucco beer joint with a parking lot alongside. There were three ancient heaps in the lot.

"So fire up some grass."

"I don't smoke, either."

Surprisingly, there was just a hint of defiance in her voice. He shot her a new look. She went quickly to the couch, sat on the arm, crossed her knees. Her top leg bobbed as if it were being yanked by a shark. But her voice firmed slightly as she added, "And my name is Lea Woodward, not 'Honey'."

"Okay," he said, waiting.

Second thoughts about her flashed alive inside his skull and he squinted as he thumbed back his hat. She seemed to have gathered herself slightly, was building a head of steam.

He'd let her roll, see where she took him.

"I'm with . . ."

But she broke it off, shot to her feet, began to pace. Short strides, short turns. She didn't cover much distance, but the movement seemed to build her confidence.

"The Rope program!" she suddenly burst out. "It's federally funded, social! We work with young people, runaways!"

She stopped, stared at him again. He remained silent. She lifted her hands, then slapped them against her legs, then resumed her pacing. "A young person needs a rope, we throw it to him or her, Mr. Shayne. Simple? I have a university degree, my father is Peter Woodward, the United States Senator, and I live here because this is an area where runaways congregate. This is their environment. It is . . ."

She halted again, again lifted her hands. Then she went to a wall, put her palms against it and leaned. It was as if she were bracing for a body search.

"None of which has anything to do with Bo Lane," Shayne said.

"No," she replied without moving. Her voice was just above a whisper again.

"Or why Bo Lane was using your car last night."

"He occasionally asked to use it, I gave him the keys. Others occasionally ask to use it, I give them the keys."

"How long have you lived here?"

"Eight . . . nine months."

"Lane lived next door all that time?"

"Yes."

"He was a club entertainer."

"Yes."

"But unemployed recently."

"For six weeks."

"He also was an alcoholic."

"Yes."

"How has he been eating the last six weeks?"

"I . . . fed him some nights."

"You also provide his booze?"

"No!"

"He went on the wagon, huh?"

"No!"

"So where did he—"

"I don't know."

"Last night, Lea. Why did Lane want your car?"

"He didn't tell me."

"Not interested?"

"I gave him the keys yesterday afternoon. I wasn't here last evening. I had phone duty."

"How far away?"

"Three blocks. We're on—"

"So you walked home when?"

"I got here around nine-thirty."

"And were standing at your front windows when Lane wheeled up down front?"

"No!"

"You didn't see him run into the building?"

"No!"

"Or leave again?"

"No!"

"A woman helped Lane into the building after the shooting."

"I'm not the only woman who lives in—"

"Who killed him, Lea? *Why* was he killed?"

She whirled from the wall suddenly. She was a mass of hot wires again. "*Get out, Mr. Shayne!*" she screamed. "I don't *know* that you are what you say, a detective! I don't have to talk to you!"

They matched stares for a long time. She wasn't telling him everything, and he knew it. She might even be lying. But she had made a decision, and he knew he was not going to break her. Not at the moment.

Shayne got out a business card, tucked it in the waistband of the jeans, turned and marched to the door. Then he looked at her over his shoulder.

"There's a couple of phone numbers on the card, Lea, for when you have a change of

mind. Or if you can't bring yourself to trust me, call Detective Kevin Donovan, Homicide Division, Police Headquarters."

She said nothing, didn't move a muscle.

"Hey," he said, "use that brain you've got tucked back of those bright eyes. It's what you tell your runaway kids, isn't it?"

## VIII

THE DAILY NEWS EDITORIAL ROOM at 5:30 in the afternoon was a scene of lethargic endeavor. Editors and reporters who had worked most of the light out of day were folding tents and preparing to slide down the shoot to beer joint or backyard patio, personal taste and pocket finances the determining factors. Those who slept through sunshine and bulldogged by moon were still nursing their first paper cups of imitation coffee.

Tim Rourke occupied a small, disheveled office in a corner of the editorial room. He was a slat of a man with an affinity for rye, cigarets, blondes, fairness and a good story. He was also a staff record holder of sorts.

Rourke had been on the *Daily News* team for twenty years. There were those in the building who swore by all the Gods that many of the paper clips

scattered on Rourke's desk-top had been there all of those twenty years. Rourke never had cleaned his desk.

He looked up and smiled as Shayne hove into view. "Ahhh."

The reporter extended a long leg, hooked a chair with his foot and pulled the chair to the desk. Shayne sat down, shoved back his hat. "Looking for a guy named Charles Pearce," he said. "You got him or do I go over to the *Herald*?"

Rourke picked up a paper clip, rolled his chair back to the doorway, fired the clip hard. Shayne watched it bounce from a desk in the news room. A bald young man with a full beard looked up from a typewriter at the desk, frowned briefly on Rourke's wave, then came to the office.

Brenda Eagle once had been Mrs. Charles Pearce. It had clicked for fifteen months or so. That was while a bed remained an unexplored land of adventure and they were a couple of hearty pioneers—and while Pearce had had a small inheritance to sustain them.

But they had awakened one bright morning to find the bread bin empty and no more mysteries beyond the sheet foothills. Pearce had returned to the only work he knew how to do. He had become a newspaper reporter again.

"And that cut it, Shayne," said Pearce with a rueful, yellow-toothed smile from inside the beard. "End of romance—since Brenda, basically, is a good-times girl, and I, basically, do not make that kind of bread. But..."

He held up a palm, wagged his head. "This isn't bad mouth about Brenda you're hearing from me. We had our fun. We merely split, that's all. She went her way—I went mine. She found a caviar man—I found a pork-and-beans girl.

"Her husband can afford her one a.m. whim sorties along the swing route and I can afford splitting a Saturday night six-pack at the kitchen table with a girl who likes being barefoot and pregnant. I'm content. I assume Brenda is—or is she in some kind of trouble? How come you want to know about me'n her?"

Mike Shayne ignored the questions. "You a member of the Spencer High School class of sixty-four?" he asked.

Pearce managed another half smile. "Nope. Lane Tech, Seattle, sixty-three. That's in the state of Washington. But you've heard about the Trio, huh?"

"Un-huh."

"Must've been quite a clique." Pearce pulled gently on the beard. "Gunderson and Lane... I haven't thought



about those names in a long time."

Out of the corner of his eye, Shayne saw Tim Rourke stir. Rourke turned casually to his desk and began thumbing through what the detective knew were penciled scribbings in a reporter's notebook. Rourke found a page, frowned as he scanned it, absently lit a fresh cigaret, then puffed hard and fast.

Shayne took one more shot. "The name Matt West ring any bells?"

Pearce shook his head. "No."

"Okay, thanks."

Without looking up from his notebook, Rourke waved a hand. "Yeah, thanks, Charlie."

Pearce seemed to want to protest the abrupt dismissal, but he glanced first at Shayne, then at Rourke, then returned to his typewriter.

Rourke continued to look down at his notebook, long neck bowed, bony shoulders hunched. "The overnight beef sheets at Police Headquarters include a hit on a cookie named Calvin Arthur Lane. Donovan caught it but he wasn't too excited about it.

"Neither were any of the other boys. And it hasn't earned much play with us. But I think I might check out the sixty-four graduating class at Spencer High School. Got any

ideas about where I might find a yearbook, Mike?"

Shayne closed the office door. "Brenda Eagle is missing, Tim. Maybe kidnapped."

Rourke arched an eyebrow. "Maybe?"

"Two million in ransom is also missing. Maybe hijacked."

"Holy cow!" Rourke breathed.

"But all options remain open for the moment," growled the detective, beginning to pace the confines of the cubicle. "Primarily because—as today's swingers put it—I'm getting some bad vibes about this one, Tim."

Rourke stabbed out his cigaret. "Talk, Mike—I'll listen. Maybe I'll come up with a fresh breeze."

But there were no new winds. Shayne had finished and Rourke sat in silence, both feet inside a wastebasket, slouched, his neck bent, his chin bobbing on his chest in deep contemplation. He reached reflexively and slowly for another cigaret.

"Tim," said Shayne, looking up at the office ceiling for a moment, "there's an angle out there that's bothering hell out of me. I'm not sure why, but it is. I've got Bo Lane from the police, West and Lea Woodward. I've got Brenda Eagle from her husband, West and Charlie Pearce. I've got West from himself and his parole man. I've got Gunderson from

West, and I'll get more from Liz Black. Ace Fletcher will dovetail.

"But the guy I don't have a line on is Ralph Emmerson Eagle III. All I've got is a grateful—almost worshipful—employee's version.

"What *about* him, Tim? Is he *really* big in the money alleys? Is he solid? Or is he plated? Could his wife's disappearance be some kind of paper shuffling? Are they pulling a con? Or could Eagle have hired a snatch, a drop in a remote grave? Is Brenda Eagle loaded with loot of her own? Would Eagle inherit?"

"I can turn up some ground on the guy, Mike," Rourke said.

"Quietly, Tim."

"Oh, yeah . . ."

Mike Shayne walked out of the building, moving fast. Rourke hadn't scribbled a word in the notebook. He didn't have to. It was all stored in a fantastic memory box.

Nor would he type a line for print. Rourke knew when the orange was ripe and when it only looked ripe. It was what made him the best reporter in Miami.

Shayne returned to his empty office in the nearly deserted Flagler Street building. There he took up a position with his legs propped across a corner of his desk, his ankles hooked, the

phone jammed between ear and shoulder. He fired cigarets with one hand by bending matches against the book and flipping the heads with a thumb while he placed the calls and talked. With each call, his scowl deepened.

The informers had nothing for him about a kidnapping or a missing two million bucks.

He finally sat with the phone hooked together, one large hand draped across it. No stirrings in the underworld. All arrows pointed to the Brenda Eagle kidnapping—the lifting of the two million clams—being an out-of-town originated amateur caper.

He sat up. Amateur capers were tough. With the pros, there was a beginning, the molded man, someone addicted to crime. There was usually a pattern to find and follow. But there were no beginnings with amateurs. An amateur could be a gentle preacher man spreading the word from a pulpit at Sunday vespers and a hell-bent, one-shot kidnapper on Monday morning. He'd hit, he'd disappear, he'd spend the rest of his days without so much as challenging a yellow traffic light.

Shayne hooked his arm up behind him and yanked open a file cabinet drawer. He fished out the fifth of Martell's, took a pull from the bottle and di-

aled a Reno number. Liz Black was waiting.

Earl William Gunderson, aka Gunner, was a hustler. Women were his bread, especially divorcees. But he was not above sticking up a liquor store in lean times. On the other hand, there had been complaints, suspicions, pickups for questioning, but no arrests. He currently lived modestly in an apartment shared with Roger Manfield Fletcher, aka Ace.

Ace Fletcher, it seemed, was a cardshark, a grifter. Very small time. He was never in the town's big games, didn't have the expertise. His were sandlot games, private, drummed up by Roger Manfield Fletcher, usually with female players.

Gunderson and Fletcher were not in town at the moment. The word around the apartment complex where they hung their hats was they had gone to Miami. No one knew why, no one knew when to expect their return.

"Okay, Liz," said Shayne. "Have fun with your judge."

"I expect to. Have fun with your case."

Shayne heard the outer office door open. He looked up but no one heaved into view. He lowered his voice as he snaked his hand inside his coat and took out the .45. "Liz, hold on!"

He braced his wrist against

his knee, the gun out of sight under the desk.

"What is it, Mike?"

"I'm not sure," he breathed. "I may give you a name. Remember it."

"You're in some kind of trouble!"

"Could be, doll."

Silence descended. He waited, .45 leveled, trigger finger taut. Reasoning swirled inside his skull. He was alone in his office in a nearly deserted building, it was mid-evening, long after normal office hours, the unlocked corridor door had been opened, but no one had appeared in his view. There was only the silence. And he was working on a new kidnapping case.

It wasn't that much of a sweat. But he had an ally in his pocket under unknown circumstances—even if Liz Black were two thousand miles away and on the end of a Long Distance telephone line. No man in his right mind discarded an ally. If necessary, he could rasp a message to her, a name . . .

A squat bulk suddenly filled the width of the doorway to Shayne's private office. The bulk was menacing in appearance. The bulldog face was set, the jaw jutted slightly, the eyes were alive and hungrily searching, the hands jammed deep

into the pockets of a wrinkled all-weather coat. Either pocket of that coat could conceal a gun.

## IX

SHAYNE SPOKE BRIEFLY into the phone and put it together. He brought the .45 into view, sat back and stuffed the gun into his shoulder rig. The bulk in his doorway scowled, took a black cigar stub from a pocket of the coat and jammed it in the corner of his mouth.

"Little edgy, Mike?" Will Gentry asked, coming into the office. He dropped heavily into the chair in front of Shayne's desk.

"It's been that kind of afternoon," Shayne said with a sigh. "Got a ball game going, but can't tell the players from the peanut vendors so far."

Suddenly he narrowed his eyes and continued, "But you didn't just stumble across me here, Will. So that means you've got bird dogs out looking for me, including one outside this building. How come?"

"Oh, nothing important," said the police chief with an offhand wave. "Just a whisper or two there may have been a snatch in town I don't have a line on. Something involving two million bucks."

He chomped on the black



cigar butt. "You were asking questions this afternoon, Mike. You had some informers sniffing around like dogs in heat. Earlier, you were checking out a Donovan homicide. Bo Lane, small-time comic, shot down on a sidewalk. You talked to Donovan, to Ray Zoner down at City Morgue. And you talked to the Auto Division boys about a couple of heaps. Put it all together for me, friend. *Fast*. And *now*!"

When Shayne finished, Gentry went around the desk and stood at the window, staring out on the lights of the city for a long time. Finally he said, "John Public never ceases to amaze me. Here we've got the best police force in the nation, experts in detection, lab facilities—"

"For the moment, Will," Shayne interrupted, "Eagle wants a Lone Ranger."

The phone on his desk jangled. He lifted the receiver against his ear. Lea Woodward said, "M-Mr. Shayne, I've had a change of—can I talk to you, again, Mr. Shayne?"

"Where are you?"

"My place."

"Thirty minutes."

"All right."

He put the phone together, stood. "Call off your dogs, Will?"

Gentry turned from the window, stared hard in silence.

Shayne went into the outer office, snapping off lights. Gentry trailed. "Give me a few hours, okay?" the redhead continued. "Give me tonight, at least. If I'm still rattling around loose by morning, I bring Eagle to you. Deal?"

They were in the corridor. Shayne snapped the door lock behind him, moved out to the elevator. Riding down, Gentry said, "Eagle is supposed to be a shrewdie with the buck, huh? So maybe you can tell him for me we've got a damned efficient police force in this town his tax dollar is paying for and he's not using!"

"I'll pass the word, Will."

"Thanks."

Gentry walked down the sidewalk away from Shayne, a wide and slightly hunched figure stomping along in a combination of mild anger and dis-

gust. Shayne saw him duck into a black sedan. The detective waited for the sedan to move out and disappear, then got into the Buick and eased into the night traffic. He didn't bother to look for a shadow. If Will Gentry had second thoughts and decided not to call off his dogs, the dog was already outside the Pickering somewhere.

The fat manager behind the lobby desk at the Pickering lifted an eyebrow but said nothing as Shayne went across the lobby and started up the dented stairwell. On the first landing, the detective snaked a look back down into the lobby. The manager had disappeared. Shayne went on up. Apartment sounds—muted voices, music, an occasional soft clanking—reached him. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

But Lea Woodward looked and acted as if she were straddling a time bomb.

She cracked the purple door and all Shayne could see was one shoulder and one eyeball. She snapped back, swung the door wide for his entry, moved away from him on jerky steps, small fists lightly thumping her thighs as she moved. She snapped around. She was pale, her eyes large circles, her lips pinched, her cheek muscles dancing.

"Close the door!" she hissed.

Shayne shut the door and leaned against it. He tipped back his hat, got out a cigaret, lit it. "Easy, lady," he said, making an effort to keep his tone casual, "No one is coming out of the woodwork."

"I'm not so sure," she stammered.

"So level with me, and let's see what we can unravel."

"Bo . . ." she began, but it dribbled off.

Shayne pushed away from the door, eased over to the wall that separated Apartments 24 and 26, smoked, tried on a one-sided smile.

"Lea," he said, "you work with down-and-outers. Okay, Bo Lane wasn't a kid, but he was a down-and-outer, and he lived next door."

"Yes." Her nod was a jerk.

"A down-and-outer nightclub comic. No income. An alcoholic."

"Yes."

"So where does an alcoholic who doesn't have dough get it to buy booze?"

She clamped her lips.

Shayne drew on the cigaret. "Last Sunday, Bo went to a high-school class reunion."

Lea Woodward looked mildly surprised. "How do you know?"

"And got bounced," continued the redhead. "Was he alone when he returned here Sunday?"

"Y-yes. I saw him come in. I went next door to help him."

"He was drunk?"

"Yes."

"What time was this?"

"Oh, around six, seven o'clock, somewhere in that area. Why?"

"You said you went next door," Shayne pressed.

"He needed coffee, food," she nodded. "I helped him to his bed, returned here, made some coffee, but he was asleep when I went back to him."

"So you didn't talk to him then, Lea."

"He was rattling, but none of it made sense. I did gather he had been asked to leave the reunion. I think others were asked to leave, too. I suppose they all became intoxicated."

"Lane didn't mention any names?"

"No."

"Have visitors later Sunday night?"

"No. I checked him a couple of times. He slept the night. And I would have heard if someone knocked on his door. As you may have noticed, the walls are thin."

"You see him Monday?"

"Not during the day, but he came home smashed again Monday night."

"And you put him to bed again?"

"Yes."

"What about Tuesday—Wednesday?"

"Yes, yes. Same thing."

"So how was he getting drunk? Who was feeding him the money or the booze?"

"I don't know!"

"Thursday, he asked to borrow your car."

"Yes! He said . . . well, he said he had a chance to make some money, but he didn't want to talk about it until he was sure, so he asked me not to question him—but it was important that he have an automobile."

"And no one visited Lane all this time?"

"Well, someone could have. I am not here during the day. But I really don't think so. He would have . . . oh, sooner or later, he would have blabbed about having visitors."

"Okay, what about last night? You ready to talk straight? Is that why you called me?"

She suddenly looked the detective straight in the eye. She was uptight, the corners of her lips drawn, her cheek muscles flicking. "Yes," she finally said softly.

## X

SHE WENT TO ONE of the front windows. "I was standing here in the dark, waiting for Bo to

return with my car. I was worried about him having an accident of some kind. I almost didn't let him borrow the car in the first place for that reason, but I relented. Anyway, I was standing here and saw him drive up and park at the curbing down front.

"He—he surprised me when he got out of the car. He seemed to be sober. I actually saw him running. I was marveling . . . and then I noticed the other two cars. One pulling into the curbing down the street, the other turning into the lot of the beer place across the way. Something told me the people in those cars were following Bo.

"No one got out of the car across the way, but a man got out of the one down the street. I saw him moving fast toward the hotel and I sensed that Bo was in trouble. I immediately went into the hallway to bring him in here, but he didn't come up. Then I heard the other man coming up the stairway and I ducked back in here. I listened to him pound on Bo's door. Finally, he went away and that's when I . . ."

She broke off, stood hunched at the window, staring without seeing. Shayne pressed gently, "Go on. You're helping."

"Well," she said, a quiver running through her, "I went



up to the roof. I thought that's where Bo would be. I mean, if he didn't come to his place—then he'd go up to the roof because that's where his pigeons are. Bo has pigeons, a couple of lofts up there . . .”

She let the words dribble off again, then continued. “But I didn't find him, and I was standing there when this man suddenly appeared in the doorway behind me. He wanted to know what I was doing. I told him I was feeding my pigeons. Then he asked me if anyone else had come up to the roof. I told him no. And he left.”

“Describe the man, Lea,” Shayne said. “Details.”

“I didn't see much,” she said. “He didn't actually come onto the roof. He was in the doorway with the light behind him. He was fairly tall, perhaps a couple of inches over six foot, narrow but not skinny. That's about all I can tell you. His face was shadowed.”

“Okay. He left. And you did what?”

“Well—I went to the front of the building. I had a bad feeling without knowing why. And then I was standing there, staring down on the street. The one car was still in the parking lot across the way and the other still at the curbing down the street. Then, all of a sudden, I saw Bo running from the alley

toward my car. And he had just reached it when the man dashed out of the hotel and grabbed him. I saw them wrestling, and then the man shot Bo. I saw Bo go down on the sidewalk.

“The man stood over him for perhaps a second or two, and then the car down the street came forward and stopped in front of the hotel and someone in the back seat opened the door for the man. He leaped inside and the car rolled away. At the same time, I saw the car in the lot across the street coming out, but he was blocked by another car that turned into the lot.

“That's all I saw, because I ran downstairs then. Bo was hurt and I helped him inside, but he collapsed in the lobby. And then he died . . . he died in my arms.”

Shayne pressed hard, “The car from down the street approached and the *back* door was opened for the killer?”

“Yes.”

“The driver could have reached over the front seat, opened a back door.

“No, no.” Lea Woodward shook her head. “The door was opened by someone in the back seat. I saw a shadow move. It was only a glimpse, but I know what I saw!”

“Okay,” snapped the redhead.

"Was it a sedan, an Oldsmobile?"

"It was a sedan, yes. But I don't know what kind of car. I don't know about cars." She was very nervous.

"Did you tell all of this to the cops?"

"Well . . . not in such detail. They didn't ask, but I told Sergeant Donovan about the two cars!"

"All right, Lea, now think hard about this one. When Bo Lane arrived back here with your car last night and you were standing there at the window and he got out of the car and ran into the building, was he carrying anything?"

Lea jerked and stood for a long time in silence before she said, "Are you guessing, asking, or do you already know, Mr. Shayne?"

The short woman had changed abruptly. Now Lea Woodward subdued, adequately prepared to accept the inevitable. She even shot the detective a look over her shoulder before returning her stare to the street.

"He was carrying an airline bag when he entered the building," Shayne said bluntly. "He was not carrying the bag when he was killed. Therefore, he entered the building, stashed the bag, left again. The man who came after Lane probably

wanted the bag. But Lane died without the bag in hand, and the killer took off without it. So, I, along with you, assume the bag remained somewhere in the building.

"Now—Lane did not come up here to his apartment, according to you. So where did he go inside the building? Answer—He didn't remain inside the building. He went on up to his pigeon lofts on the roof, then went down the fire escape to the alley and bolted. Do I go up to the roof and search the lofts, Lea, or have you already done that?"

"The bag is under my bed, Mr. Shayne."

"And it is filled with money."

"A large amount of money. I haven't counted it, I haven't *touched* it. I merely unzipped the bag, saw what was inside; zipped it and put the bag under my bed."

"And have been a bundle of nerves since."

"Well . . . I haven't been sure what to do. I'm not sure I'm doing the right thing now. Perhaps I should take the bag to the police."

"Will you give it to me? I'm working for the man who put the money in the bag."

Lea stared hard at the detective. "Mr. Shayne," she burst, "I don't understand any of this! I—"

She cut off the words with the sound. It was a scraping noise and it had come from beyond the wall Shayne was braced against. He pushed himself away from the wall, frowned. "Somebody new has moved in next door already?"

"No!"

"So let's see what's going on over there."

## XI

THE MAN IN THE SKI MASK who shot out of Bo Lane's apartment had surprised and jolted Shayne. Now Mike Shayne stood on his toes, plastered against a wall in a black alley, a sedan pinning him. He was an open target for the driver of the car, who could pump lead into his chest and then roar on down the alley and pick up his accomplice in the ski mask. It would be finished in a flash.

Police would swoop in. The sound of the wailing sirens was much closer now. But they would be too late. By the time they found the body of a red-headed detective in a dark alley, the sedan would be out of the neighborhood.

"M-Mr. Shayne . . ."

Lea Woodward's voice floated to him from the depths of the sedan. He expelled a lot of air and wiped blood from his nose with the back of his gun hand.

Squeezing between car fender and brick wall, he freed himself and kicked the two garbage cans out of the way. Lea eased the sedan away from him.

He piled into the front seat beside her, put a handkerchief to his bleeding nose and held his head on the back of the seat. The sirens were closer.

"Drive!" he snapped. "I don't need fuzz."

"M-Mr. Shayne—you're hurt!"

"Drive!"

She took them out of the alley and turned down a street. The redhead kept his head on the back of the seat.

"Where am I going?" she asked.

"Cruise until my nose stops bleeding," he told her.

Finally he sat up. The flow of blood had stopped. He looked around, failed to recognize the area. He flashed a look behind them. No swirling red lights were chasing them. And then he saw the airline bag on the back seat.

"The money?"

Lea Woodward's nod was a jerk. She didn't take her eyes from the street. "I didn't know what was happening. I went back upstairs and got it. I don't know where I was going. All I could think was to get away. But then—for some reason I still don't understand—I turned into the alley and I saw you fall

down and . . . I don't know what I'm doing mixed up in any of this!"

"Okay, doll. Easy." Shayne shifted on the seat as his thoughts whirled. "Head back to your place," he said finally.

She shot him a glance.

"And I need to borrow your car for a few hours. Mine is at the Pickering, but the place is going to be swarming with fuzz. How about you get out a couple of blocks from there and walk in?"

Her fingers worked against the steering wheel, but she said nothing. Three blocks from the Pickering, she braked at the curbing and slid out from behind the steering wheel. A row of squat buildings fronted the sidewalk to Shayne's right. Light poured from a window in one of the buildings to form a large patch on the sidewalk. Hanging in the window was a red neon sign advertising a phone number.

"Okay," said Lea Woodward. "I'll be here until I hear from you. You see the number?"

Shayne grunted and pulled himself in behind the steering wheel. "You recognize the guy in the ski mask?"

"No."

"Nothing familiar about him? How about his build? Anything like the man who came up to the roof?"

"Well . . . yes. Similar. I mean—tall and sort of narrow. Yes."

Shayne left her standing in puzzlement as he wheeled away. Ralph Eagle and Matt West also stood in brief puzzlement when he entered the Eagle house with the airline bag in hand. Then West took the bag, glanced inside. Black glasses suddenly hung on Shayne.

"Spill, man," he breathed.

Shayne briefed them and West took the bag to Eagle, dropped it on the couch beside his employer. Eagle did not give the bag a glance. "In your opinion, Mr. Shayne," he said coldly, "what does all of this do to Brenda's chance for survival?"

"She could be alive, she could be dead," the detective said. "Or she could be killed in the next few hours. One thing appears certain—the kidnappers are still around. They're looking for the dough. Originally, Lane may have had a part in the scheme, or he may have been a hijacker. We may never know. But the kidnappers are money-hungry. They want that bag!"

Eagle suddenly slammed a fist against a palm. "I wish they *had* it!"

West interjected, "What now, shamus?"

Shayne fixed him with a hard stare. "After Lane was hit," he said, "the Olds picked up the killer. How many people were inside it?"

A frown knitted West's smooth brow. "Driver."

"Could there have been somebody in the back seat?"

The frown deepened. "Maybe. I saw action on the walk, saw the Olds moving. I started to square around to tail. So I had my eyes off the heap some. Could be someone was in back, but I didn't see nobody, man. That Woodward gal, she think there was?"

"Un-huh."

"Maybe," West repeated slowly, "but if there was, how come I didn't notice when I was tailing? All I ever saw was one dude in the Pontiac, two in the Olds."

"The third person could have been lying low, out of sight in the back seat or—Lea Woodward could be wrong," said Shayne, tucking at an earlobe in thought. "Okay, try this. Six-one, six-two, say a hundred and eighty pounds, maybe less, twenty-five to thirty in years, clothing just a hair above average. He keeps his cool, moves fluid and quick, a little gutsy, maybe. Husky voice, kind of deep rattle in it here and there. Fit Gunderson or Fletcher?"

"Could fit Gunner, yeah—but



that's pretty damn general."

"A guy in a ski mask who opens a door and bangs a fist off your beak doesn't leave much time for particulars," the detective replied. He began to pace.

"Have you got any idea where in hell Gunderson and Fletcher might be hanging their hats in this town—that is, if they're still here? Anything dropped at the reunion? Somebody must have asked them where they were staying."

"Somebody could have," West nodded. "But it wasn't me, man. I didn't give a damn. I can run down the list of locals who were there and we can start phoning them."

Shayne was at the phone when it jangled. He stepped back, shot a look across his shoulder to Eagle. Eagle limped up beside him, answered, stiffened instantly.

Suddenly he said, "I want to talk to my wife. I want to hear her voice."

Eagle stiffened again, remained ramrod straight as he listened. "Yes," he said crisply. "Yes." Then again, "Yes." He lifted a hand as if in protest. "One moment, please..." he gasped. "You want me to get *another* two million? But that's impossible!" He listened. "All right, all right. Yes, I'll get it, somehow. I'll... is she alive? I want to speak to her."

He turned, limped away from Shayne with phone in hand, limped back. He was taut. "I think... she's there," he breathed. And then his voice climbed. "Brenda? Brenda, are you all *right*? Are they..."

The pitch dropped and he sagged. He looked at Shayne. "She was on for just a mom... Yes? Yes? All *right*, tell me where to deliver it!" He shot a look at the airline bag on the couch. "I already..."

Shayne's fist under Ralph Eagle's jaw sent the millionaire flying back and spilled him on to the couch. Shayne snatched up the phone receiver and tossed it to an angry Matt

West, who was charging him.

"Tell them Eagle collapsed!" he snapped. "Tell them who you are and that you'll cooperate on his behalf! They can check you with Mrs. Eagle. Tell them it will take a couple of days to get the money. *Don't* tell them you already have the dough!"

## XII

WEST FINALLY PUT the phone together. But instead of saying anything, he dashed to Eagle who was struggling to sit up on the couch.

"What?" Shayne asked.

"Noon tomorrow," West replied without turning from his employer. "The dude's gonna call then, set up another meet."

"Look," snarled Shayne, "your main man there was about a breath away from getting his wife killed. If he had said he had the original package, somebody would have wanted to know how he knew where to find it. Somebody would immediately have smelled dead fish, maybe panicked. That smack on the chops probably keeps Mrs. Eagle alive for at least a few more hours!"

Neither man at the couch said a word.

Shayne lit a fresh cigaret, exhaled a large cloud of smoke. "Anybody recognize the voice?"

West shook head. Eagle managed, "No."

"Sounded disguised, man,"

West added.

"Background sounds?"

"Street noises," said West.

"I'd guess a pay phone."

Shayne frowned. "You sure you talked to your wife, Eagle?"

West turned on his knee. The black glasses hung on the red-head. Eagle looked puzzled as he continued to massage his bruised jawline. "Yes," he said finally.

"Okay," said Shayne, "let's get back to where we were. Start making phone calls, see if you can come up with a place Gunderson and Fletcher might be bedding. At the moment, they seem to be the key to every move we make."

Eagle stood up. "I'm going to make some tea."

West waited until his employer was out of sight before turning on Shayne. "What gives, Shamus?" he asked in a low voice. "And don't give me jive, man. You're suspicious about the woman my man talked to on the phone."

Shayne weighed briefly, then said, "Pay phone on a street. Do you waltz a kidnap victim out to a pay phone on a street?"

"There's plenty of areas in town no passerby is gonna take a second look—specially at this hour of night. People are skit-

tish these days. They don't like dark streets no more, they avoid 'em. They find themselves on one, they fly. They don't pay no attention right or left."

"Un-huh." Shayne agreed thoughtfully. "But why have her there in the first place? Anticipation that Eagle is going to ask for her?"

"Why not?"

"Yeah, maybe," said the red-head slowly.

"Man, what *are* you thinking? I don't like—"

Shayne waved him off. "Get on the phone. Let's get a line on the Reno boys."

The phone calls did not produce a lead to Gunderson and Fletcher. No one at the reunion had bothered to ask either where they were hanging their hats in Miami.

West finally put the phone together for the last time. "I'm out of names, man. We start with the hotels? Knowing those two cats, they probably ain't sleeping in any fleabag."

"They're hauling a kidnap victim in and out of a fancy joint?" Shayne said caustically as he again began to pace.

He shot a glance at Ralph Eagle. The millionaire sat slumped on the couch, his eyes dead, a teacup balanced on his thighs.

"What was your wife wearing the day she disappeared,

Eagle?" the detective asked suddenly.

Eagle started. He looked briefly dumbfounded, then said, "I don't know. I didn't see her before she left the house Monday. Why?"

"Could you tell by looking in her closet?"

"Perhaps."

But Eagle wasn't sure as he contemplated a wide closet door in the large bedroom. The interior of the closet was solid with bright clothing, pants suits and slacks dominating the wardrobe display. Shayne had already inventoried the bedroom, found it tidy and expensively appointed.

He stood at a dressing table, waiting for Eagle to make a decision. Almost routinely, he used an index finger to slide open drawers and glance inside. One drawer held him. It contained a stack of small, feminine handkerchiefs. An indentation on the stack held his gaze.

"Red," Eagle finally said from the closet. "She has a bright red pants suit she is fond of wearing. I don't see it here."

"Your wife normally carry a purse?"

"Always. Against my wishes, she is in the habit of carrying rather large sums of cash. She does not own a credit card and she refuses to be bothered with

a checking account. So..."

"She carry a gun in that purse?"

From the bedroom doorway behind Shayne, West interjected, "You got a particular problem, shamus?"

Shayne whirled to face him. "I'm saying there's a gun missing from this drawer. You want to argue?"

West shrugged. "Nope. It's a lady's. A thirty-two. Like Mr. Eagle says, she carries bread and—"

"Carries heat to a dental appointment?" Shayne interrupted.

West soured. "Look, the lady carries green, she carries a rod—I don't care if she's going to the corner drug. Okay?"

Shayne walked past West and out of the bedroom. West turned and moved along beside him. Going down the thickly carpeted staircase, Shayne suddenly headed in a new direction.

"Back in your high school days, West, back when Gunderson was a kid, where could you find him? Yeah, I know, the Spencer High district, but give me some streets, some hangouts. Pinpoint him."

"Too long ago, man," West said, wagging his head. "Everything's changed. The old places ain't there no more. I mean, yeah, the buildings are



still there, but they got new signs on the windows all up and down Buford, Morgan and Spencer Avenues. Maybe there's one or two old holdouts still there, but—"

"Between what streets?" Shayne asked as they reentered the living room.

"Twenty-third and Thirty-second. His old man's garage building was at Twenty-sixth and Buford—it's empty now—and there's the newsstand on Morgan and—"

"Any hotels, motels in the area?"

"Naw. What the hell you looking for?"

"Gunderson."

"Hell, he ain't gonna go down there! Why would he? Nobody he knows is around anymore!"

"But it is the one area of the city familiar to him, right? The one area he *knows*. And how do you know everyone is gone? He might spot a face or two."

"Man, you're reaching, Shayne."

"His father had a garage business?"

"His old man was a mechanic. He had this garage, kind of a large place. Hell, I don't know the setup. But I *do* remember the old man died while we were seniors in Spencer High. The place was shut down shortly after."

Shayne digested it. He lit a

cigaret, puffed, looked around. Eagle wasn't in sight.

West offered, "He's had it, shamus. He needs to get some sleep. Let him."

Shayne shot a look at the airline bag on the couch. "While you guard the bank?"

West grunted. "Don't worry about it. That's funny stuff."

Shayne took a quick pull on his cigaret. "There had to be a reason you two have been treating two million clams like just another can of fish worms."

"I've still got a buddy or two from stir around town, man," West growled.

"Like Karl Gunderson might still have a buddy or two around town, down in the old Spencer High district?"

### XIII

AT ONE-THIRTY IN the morning, the streets and sidewalks in the old Spencer High district of Miami were poorly lighted and almost deserted. An occasional set of headlights rolled up and down the weblike network of narrow avenues and bypaths, the lights reflecting dimly from the sparse number of parked vehicles.

Sidewalk pedestrians scurried and dipped and darted, those walking the curbs hustling along as if anxious to leave the area behind them, those lurk-

ing in the building shadows appearing briefly as if to swoop down on one of the curb walkers then fading into another patch of blackness.

Shayne cruised slowly in Lea Woodward's Pontiac. He studied the building fronts. There was a splotch of window light here and there. They all looked alike—dull pebbles.

And he was looking for a gold nugget!

He slapped the steering wheel with a flat palm, glanced down at the gas gauge again. The needle quivered slightly against E. He slid into a long, empty curb slot, flipped off the key, darkened the headlights. Then he sat, slumped and staring, without seeing.

He felt as if he had set out in search of swamp ghosts. Better he should nurse the Pontiac back to Rope headquarters, pick up his Buick, catch a few hours of shuteye, gear his thinking to action at a drop site after Ralph Eagle got the noon word about where to deliver the airline bag.

But he left the Pontiac, shut the door and went up on the sidewalk. He was conscious of foot sounds from somewhere inside the deep building shadows. "Anybody rips off this heap, he gets a busted skull!" Shayne bellowed to no one in particular.

The foot sounds were halted.

He eased on down to the intersection of Twenty-sixth Street and Buford Avenue. The building to his right had been an autor repair garage in its day. There were two walk-in doors on the Twenty-sixth Street side, a larger vehicle door on the Buford side.

Neither knob of the walk-in doors turned under his fingers. He eased on around to Buford, found a large clasp and padlock. He returned to one of the walk-in doors, faded into its recessed blackness and stood facing the street. A couple of pedestrians in view across the street hurried along.

Mike Shayne took a deep breath and slammed his hip hard against the door several times. Finally there was a splintering sound. He slammed again and the edge of the door split. His weight carried him into a heavy musty odor.

He stood in the blackness, listening hard, waiting for his eyes to adjust. The dust smell was thick in his nostrils. He had a sense of vast emptiness. Far ahead five vertical patches of paleness were aligned. He figured these were windows in a back wall of the building, their paleness produced by a street lamp in an alley.

He inched forward, feeling his way with slow steps, his

ears tuned for alien sound. But there was only the light scraping of his feet. Finally, he had a sensation of being near the middle of the building. He turned slowly in a full circle, saw patches of light on three sides, none to his right. He was oriented now—two street walls, an alley wall. The unbroken black area was the wall abutting the next building in the block.

He moved forward again, gradually became conscious of a deeper area of darkness to his right front. He eased to it, reached out. There was nothing straight ahead, but when he spread his arms slowly, his hands came into contact with concrete. He stood in the silence, puzzled, feeling, testing.

Then he got a whiff of fresh air.

Or was it his imagination?

He got out a matchbook, lit a match, cupped it, then held it high. The flame flickered and he found himself standing at the head of a concrete stairway. He got another slight whiff of fresh air, then he saw the faded yellow-and-black sign on the wall to his left. It was an old Civil Defense sign from World War II that read—Bomb Shelter.

He flicked out the match, groped for the stairwell handrail, started down the cement

steps. He moved slowly, into deeper blackness. A thin, right-angle thread of light appeared before him as he continued to descend the steps. He moved down from the bottom step and stood in what he knew was a basement. The right angle of light was dead ahead. He guessed the light was coming from behind a door that was no longer air tight.

He moved to the door, tested its surface with silent fingertips. It was cool metal. He put an eye against the crack of light but all he got was brilliance. Somewhere a small motor kicked on suddenly and he tensed, crouching slightly. He shot a look over his shoulder. Only blackness...

Then he was suddenly flooded with the crawly feeling that he was not alone.

Mike Shayne went on down on his knees, inched into a profile position, his shoulder brushing the door. The humming sound filled his left ear and he knew the motor was inside the room behind the metal door. But he kept his eyes glued to the black area of the stairwell.

Had there been someone staked out in the street-level vastness of the garage? Had that someone watched his forced entry, trailed him on silent feet to the stairway, al-

lowed him to descend? Had he blindly eased into a basement trap?

Slowly, he took the .45 from its rig. He listened hard. The only sound was the light humming in his left ear. No foot sounds came from the stairwell, no heavy breathing. So perhaps he was reading too much into a feeling...

He put his left ear against the door crack. The humming sound came on stronger. He sniffed the crack. Fresh air. An air-conditioning unit was working behind the door.

Air-conditioning and electric lights in the bomb shelter of an empty building—had some winos found a heaven?

He used the muzzle of the .45 and rapped hard on the metal door, arched back from the frame, kept both eyes peeled on the solid black of the stairwell.

Nothing... Either from behind the door or from the well.

He rapped again.

This time a sleep-filled voice beyond the door yelled, "Gunner? Hey, for Chris' sake! Come on in! It ain't locked."

Shayne nosedived to his belly and flipped over once, making a complete turn. The sound of the gunshot was deafening. He heard a howl of male surprise from behind the door. Then another slug smacked into the metal door. This time he saw

the spurt of flame high on the stairwell and triggered an answering shot. A man yelped.

Shayne heard the plop of a body spilling down the stairway as he spun on his stomach. The door was opening. Light spilled out. No one appeared in the doorway, but gunshots rattled his eardrums and slugs bounced from the concrete near his face.

He pressed himself against the wall, brought the .45 around. The man who had spilled down the steps was in the patch of light from the doorway. He was coming up on one knee, his other leg trailing away from him at an odd angle. Shayne saw blood pumping from the bad limb.

The man had a gun in his left hand. The muzzle came up as he yelled, "*It's the redheaded due, from Lane's place, Ace! Get...*"

Matchlight at the top of the stairway had been enough to identify the detective.

Gunderson swung his gun toward Shayne. The detective fired another shot into the wounded man's leg. Gunderson reared up and spun crazily as a fresh fusillade of slugs was triggered from inside the bomb shelter. The back of Gunderson's skull split open while he was still spinning. He went down hard and Shayne knew he was dead.

Another man appeared in the doorway of the bomb shelter. The gun in his hand was spitting bullets wildly. Shayne fired two low shots and the man went up on his toes and pitched the gun from his hand. Then he fell forward and crashed face down on the concrete floor.

Shayne remained plastered against the wall. He was in darkness. Light from the doorway spilled out on the area immediately before him. There were two bodies. Gunderson lay sprawled at the foot of the stairway, Ace Fletcher had gone down just outside the open door.

Shayne eased over to the doorway, looked inside the bomb shelter. The attractive woman in the trim red pants suit sat taut on the edge of an old Army cot. There was a purse in her lap and her eyes were round as coin dollars.

"Mrs. Eagle?" he said.

It was a long time before she moved. Finally she nodded.

"I came here for you."

He took her from the shelter. She was quivering as they stepped over the bodies. He held her elbow as they went up the stairway. He guided her through the darkness and outside to the Pontiac. He put her in the front seat and then got in behind the steering wheel.

At Police Headquarters, she protested, "But I want to go home!"

"Violent deaths must be reported."

"But—"

Shayne waved her down.

#### XIV

THE CROWD PACKED the office of Will Gentry, chief of Miami Police. Gentry sat slouched low in a chair behind his desk, his face a dark mask. The ever-present black cigar butt jutted up from a corner of his turned-down mouth. Gentry did not like getting up from his bed and coming to his office at five o'clock in the morning.

Detective Donovan wasn't happy either. Nor was Ralph Eagle III, or his wife. Or Matt West.

Shayne finally stepped forward and put his .45 on Gentry's desk. "Have your technicians check the slugs in the two Reno boys, Will. Do I ever shoot to kill?"

"Which means?" growled Gentry.

"If you find anything out of my gun above the knee caps in either of them, I'm turning myself in."

Gentry sat forward suddenly, scowled on the single sheet of paper on his desk. "It says here in the prelim from the lab the

probable cause of deaths was penetrations of the scalps by bullets."

"Caliber?"

"Too early, Mike, *damnit!* You know that!"

Shayne went to Brenda Eagle, took the purse from her lap, tossed it to the police chief. "I think You'll find a .32 in the bag, Will. I think you'll find it's been fired recently, like in the last few hours. All you'll have to do is match slugs. You ever heard of a kidnap victim who isn't trussed and who is allowed to pack a gun?"

She was on her feet, livid. But she folded fast under the silent stares, sat again. Her head went down. She shivered. Finally she murmured, "It was to be such a simple thing, a fifty-fifty split. One million for

them, one for me. We each were to go our way."

After a silence, Ralph Eagle said, "Why, darling?"

"Because I'm tired of living with a cripple. I'm too young!"

Shayne looked at Gentry. "I guess she figured she had to kill down there tonight, Will. Desperation, panic. If she got away with it, she could always return home, try something else later."

Gentry remained silent. He sat low in the chair, his fingers steepled under his jaw, a heavy scowl pulling his unshaven face down. Shayne turned to leave the office. A pair of dark glasses hung on him.

"You wanted the shamus, brother," he said.

"Yeah," Matt West muttered. "YEAH!"

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*Watch for These New Stories Next Month:*

**THE FINEST OF FAMILIES by GEORGE C. CHESBRO**

**INCIDENT AT THE BRIDGE by NAN HAMILTON**

**SPECIAL INGREDIENT by LORRAINE MARISE**

**MIRACLE CURE by FREDERICK PAUL WALTER**

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# MR. WONG TAKES A HOLIDAY

by

DAN ROSS

*A jewel thief is betrayed by his  
unusual fondness for sweets.*

MEI WONG USUALLY spent his annual holiday in Singapore where he had lived before World War II. But this year he had decided a fortnight in Ceylon might be a pleasant change. There were several jewel merchants with whom he did business living on the island and he looked forward to meeting them personally.

His decision had turned out well. He liked the Metropole Hotel in Colombo where he'd

booked his room and the merchants had gone out of their way to entertain him. Now on the afternoon of his second to last day in Ceylon he entered the lobby of the hotel in a pleasant frame of mind. As he



went to the desk for his room key the clerk gave him a curious glance.

"You are Mr. Wong, the proprietor of the Bombay Art and Curio Company, aren't you?" the clerk asked.

Mei Wong nodded as he accepted his key and wondered at the young man's sudden interest. "I am," he said.

The clerk produced a slip with a written message. "We had a phone call from you from Kandy in the mountain district. An Inspector Bannerjee of the Bombay Homicide Division wants you to call him back at once." The clerk waved a slim hand toward a phone booth. "If you'll step in there, the operator will put it through for you."

Mei Wong bowed, a solemn Buddha-like figure, in a Panama hat and immaculate white suit. He padded across the lobby to the telephone booth with an agility surprising in one of his tremendous avoirdupois.

Within minutes, the operator had the town of Kandy on the long distance line. Then Inspector Bannerjee's familiar voice came over the wires. "Sorry to bother you, Mei Wong. But I'm in the very devil of a mess here I heard you were in Colombo and thought you might help."

"I plan to leave on the night

plane tomorrow," Mei Wong told him.

"That would still give you time," the Inspector said. "I have been here as a guest of Major Currie, a retired British army man, and now I find myself involved in a jewel robbery. I'm sure you might help. There's a train leaving Colombo for Kandy at five. Why not come up on that? Take your choice of two trains leaving during the day tomorrow. That should get you back in time for your night plane."

"Very well," Mei Wong agreed. "Where will we meet?"

"I'll book you a room at the Queen Hotel and be in the lobby waiting for you," the Inspector promised.

Two hours later Mei Wong got off the train in the mountain city nestled by a blue lake. He decided to make the short journey to the hotel on foot as he was carrying only a small overnight case. He passed the market with its fruits, vegetables and woven baskets in neat piles. Bulging buses honked their way through crowds of shoppers. Finally he came to the hotel, just across the park from the temple of the Tooth.

In the lobby the tall bronzed Inspector with the pointed black beard stretched out his hand. "I consider this a favor, Mr. Wong," he said.



Mei Wong smiled faintly. "I have enjoyed the trip," he said. "Perhaps it might be better to go to my room for our discussion."

A few minutes later, Mei Wong sat in an easy chair as the Inspector paced back and forth, telling his story.

"This happened last night," he said. "My host, Major Currie, invited me to visit one of his friends in the European colony here. A man named Marciano, reputedly very wealthy, sort of rough diamond who started life as a hotel chef in London. He gradually came to own a modest West End hotel and eventually a chain extending throughout the British Isles.

"He sold them and came out east to live. Built a castle-like place here and entertains lavishly." The Inspector paused and his keen eyes met Mei Wong's. "He also has built up quite a collection of jewels. In fact he has some fabulous stones, including the large blood-red Ruby of Chan Sung. Have you heard of it?"

Mei Wong nodded. "He bought it about five years ago. It cost a small fortune."

"So I understand," the Inspector said. "Last night it was stolen while I was in the same room with him."

Mei Wong's eyebrows lifted

slightly. "Please explain the details."

"After Major Currie and I went to Marciano's place, we found he had other guests. Three of them to be exact. A wealthy collector from the United States, John Woods, a jewel merchant from Paris, Jules-Leger, and a lovely young English woman from Colombo, Judith Barclay. These guests had not been haphazardly chosen. They had all come to make an offer for the Ruby of Chan Sung."

"Then he has it for sale?" Mei Wong showed interest.

"Yes," the Inspector said. "He's had some kind of financial reverse and needs cash. They were all on hand to look at the gem. Major Currie and I were also in his study last night when he brought it out for us to see. An unusually large stone."

"What were the circumstances of its theft?" Mei Wong asked.

The Inspector frowned. "Marciano brought out the jewel in its fancy case and showed it to us briefly. Then, since the room was stifling hot, he decided to turn on the air-conditioning. He put the open jewel case on his desk and went over and turned it on. At once the lights went out as a fuse blew. It took several minutes for a servant to

replace the fuse and by that time the jewel case was empty."

"No one left or entered the room during the dark period?" the art dealer asked.

The Inspector shook his head. "No, Marciano rang for a servant, who only came to the door and then rushed off to fix the lights. The rest of us were seated around the study. Yet, when the lights came on, the jewel was gone. Marciano, who is excitable, at once accused Jules Leger. There was an angry scene and, in spite of my searching everyone and the room as well, no sign of the jewel turned up. The local police aren't up to this sort of crime. They've asked my help."

Mei Wong sighed. "I assume the ruby was well insured?"

Inspector Bannerjee nodded. "As a matter of fact Miss Barclay's brother in Colombo has the insurance through the company he represents."

"Did anyone move about when the room was in darkness?" Mei Wong asked.

The Inspector again nodded. "Yes—as a matter of fact. I did."

Mei Wong smiled. "I trust I am not about to hear the confession of a jewel thief."

The Inspector shook his head. "No—I can't solve this that easily. I felt I might be able to help, so I moved over by the air

conditioner. And I'd almost be willing to swear John Woods the American, left his chair once." He sighed. "Anyway they're all gathering in the same room tonight to meet you."

It was a subdued group Mei Wong encountered as he went into the small study with the Inspector that evening. Marciano rose with a glum expression on his fat, swarthy face to greet the art dealer.

"We need your help here," he said. "I've been robbed."

Mei Wong had them go over the entire scene for his benefit. Then Jules Leger stood up angrily. "I must leave Kandy in the morning," he said. "I cannot play this game any longer. I had nothing to do with this in spite of what Marciano says."

The fat man at the desk scowled. "Once a thief, always a thief."

Mei Wong stared at Leger. "What does he mean?"

Leger's face went red. "Marciano has known me since the old days when I was a waiter in one of his hotels. I was mixed up in a petty larceny case concerning a shortage in the restaurant accounts. He's never stopped throwing it at me. The Inspector searched me and found nothing."

Now it was the American's turn to protest. "I agree with

Leger," he said. "I say this is all nonsense. Marciano has no right to make wild accusations."

Mei Wong fixed him with an intent look. "Inspector Bannerjee says you were the only one beside himself who moved about after the lights went out last evening."

The American shrugged. "So what?"

Now the Inspector stepped forward. "I see you are wearing a different suit tonight."

"I happen to have more than one," The American sounded sarcastic.

"But I asked you to come exactly as you were last night," the Inspector said.

"You think my other suit might have hidden pockets?" John Woods asked.

Mei Wong spoke up. "That is certainly a possibility."

Now Judith Barclay, a pretty English blonde, said, "I think there must have been someone else in the room. Someone none of us was aware of in the darkness."

"It seems doubtful," Mei Wong said. Then, staring at the cigaret case she was about to open, he asked, "May I examine that?"

The girl stared up at him with a hint of fear in her eyes. "If you like."

He took it and, after examining

it for a moment, pressed some unseen spring and a metal square sprang open, revealing a secret compartment large enough to hold a medium-sized jewel.

"Interesting," he said. "I've seen these before."

The girl showed amazement. "My brother gave it to me as a present. I didn't know anything about that compartment."

Mei Wong smiled faintly. "You can see that this puts you under suspicion." He turned to Marciano. "I am interested in the size of the ruby. May I see the jewel case in which it rested?"

The fat man nodded and, reaching in a drawer, brought out an elaborate case and handed it to Wong. "That's the one," he said.

Mei Wong opened it and compared its size with the cigaret case's hidden compartment. Then he said, "I'd like to consider this overnight. In fact I may have to make a quick journey to Colombo in the morning. Could I prevail on you all to stay here a few hours longer and meet again in this room tomorrow afternoon?"

After some grumbling they all agreed. When Mei Wong and the Inspector left the mansion together, the art dealer said, "Do they have a reasonably good police department in

Colombo—one capable of making microscopic examination of items?"

Inspector Bannerjee nodded. "Yes. I'll drive you down in the morning."

It was close to four o'clock the following afternoon when Mei Wong joined the strange group in the millionaire's study again. The old art dealer mopped his perspiring head and bowed to them all.

"I'm sorry to be late," he said, "and I'm very warm." He glanced at Marciano. "May I ask you to turn on the air conditioner?"

The fat man rose reluctantly. "It won't help much. It's not working too well." He turned it on and Mei Wong noted it made a grating noise.

The old Chinaman said, "Please turn it off. I understand what you meant."

Marciano did so, but before he could return to his chair, the art dealer held up a protesting hand. "First, will you please turn on all the lights that were on the night of the theft."

The fat man looked surly. "But it's daylight!"

"I have a reason," Mei Wong said with a glance at Inspector Bannerjee, who stood near the other three again seated before the millionaire's desk.

When the lights had all been turned on, Marciano sullenly

seated himself at his desk again. Then quite unexpectedly, Mei Wong went over and turned on the air conditioner. The moment he did so the lights went out.

He smiled. "I see that the faulty air conditioner is still burning out your fuses, Mr. Marciano. And I am sure that is no more a surprise to you now than it was the other evening."

Marciano jumped up. "What are you suggesting?"

"I am suggesting," Mei Wong said "that you wanted the lights to go out for your own reasons. You knew they would the moment you touched the switch of the air conditioner. After that, you had no problem in stealing your own ruby."

"*Prove that!*" Marciano snapped.

"I can," Mei Wong assured him. "You used a unique method of disposal. You ate it!"

Inspector Bannerjee led the gasps that sounded in the room. He said, "*Ate it?*"

Mei Wong nodded. "A fool-proof way of getting rid of it in the darkness. He at once established it had been stolen for his insurance claim and left all of you in the shadow of guilt."

Marciano said, "You're out of your bloody mind!"

Mei Wong shook his head. "The clue came to me in a

strange manner—through the name of this town you live in, Kandy. That is why I asked you for the jewel case last night. I had it examined under a microscope in Colombo today and they found evidence of melted sugar in the silk lining. The jewel that vanished, the jewel your guests saw so briefly, was candy, Mr. Marciano. Your experience in the kitchen stood you in good stead when you decided on this trickery. But the

evidence remains to prove your guilt."

The fat man's shoulders drooped. "At least I fooled all the others," he murmured.

Mei Wong smiled faintly. "I must hurry to return to Colombo in time for my plane. And if you need money so badly, Mr. Marciano, I suggest you try and obtain it legally. My studio will always be interested in purchasing the ruby."



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COMING SOON—NEW STORIES BY

BRETT HALLIDAY

EDWARD D. HOCH

ERNEST SAVAGE

WILLIAM E. CHAMBERS

EDWARD VAN DER RHOER

PHILIP SEGAL

JOHN DAVID BALL

FREDERICK PAUL WALTER

DON WALL

DAVID MAZROFF

HERBERT HARRIS

KEN LIEBOWITZ

*Thor Gradisher was killed by drinking a bottle of booze. The problem facing Lt. Boordy lay in finding out who had forced the Malibu genius to drink it. Boordy was sure Amy Van Dyne was the only possible suspect—and one suspect was not enough.*

# FIT FOR FRAMING

by **JERRY JACOBSON**

ABOUT THOR GRADISHAR'S paintings I knew very little—but then, I knew precious less about Picasso's and I still couldn't differentiate between a Euphronios vase and a beer schooner. Gradisher's work seemed qualified enough. It sold well all over the country and notices about his books and shows were constantly popping up in the Arts/Books Section of the Los Angeles *Times*. He also had the proper Malibu address with a popular though seclusive acress and a money-gluttled Rock songwriter for neighbors.

Alive, a man like Thor Gradisher is someone a

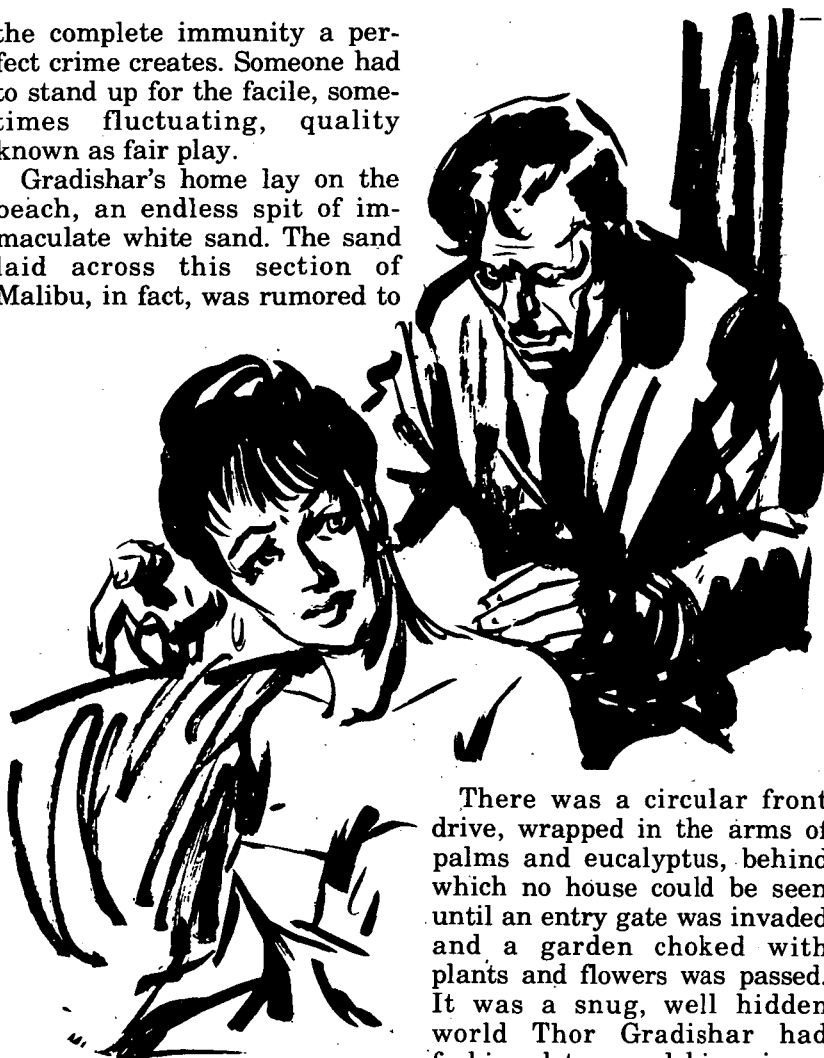
homicide detective isn't likely to meet. Dead was something else. I wasn't looking forward to the inquiry.

Investigation of the violent death of a celebrity of the stature of Thor Gradisher is not an occurrence for which a detective lies in wait. One encounters too much protocol and influence. One meets excesses of deceit and tangled networks of people moving out in so many directions that getting lost is a larger probability than getting answers.

But Thor Gradisher was dead and his murderer was depending on a loose investigation and

the complete immunity a perfect crime creates. Someone had to stand up for the facile, sometimes fluctuating, quality known as fair play.

Gradishar's home lay on the beach, an endless spit of immaculate white sand. The sand laid across this section of Malibu, in fact, was rumored to



have been shipped from the Spanish Riviera by a long-dead motion picture czar, like a cargo of wheat in the hold of a ship.

There was a circular front drive, wrapped in the arms of palms and eucalyptus, behind which no house could be seen until an entry gate was invaded and a garden choked with plants and flowers was passed. It was a snug, well hidden world Thor Gradishar had fashioned to guard his privacy and his employment, not realizing it would also present nearly foolproof camouflage arranged to cover for the arrival and departure of his killer.

A patrolman at the front door showed me down a dim hallway of Spanish tile. I saw no one in the dropped living-room, only the mute and immobile hosts of art—a neon sculpture whose plug and cord lay on the hardwood floor like a thin dark snake asleep—a squat and gaudy totem pole of flamboyant colors and outlandish masks—a piece of bronze stretching for a vaulted ceiling—a glimmering monster shot with massive oval holes and titled *Vertebrae*.”

The walls’ every inch was covered with pictures—oils, lithographs, pen-and-inks, impressionistic water colors, mathematical placements of lines and traffic jams of arcs and angles. There were prints by ancient masters whose names even I knew—plus a few originals by masters both past and present.

The room exuded the man and bespoke a short, forty-plus years of prolificity, of varied genius, of success and wealth far beyond the dreams of anyone’s conception of a modern-day artist’s success. Something of that success, or that genius, or that wealth, had put Thor Gradishar upon a collision course with death.

It was a room both stifling in its volume of art and humbling in its obvious quality, humbling when one stood within it. The

dining room lent some relief. It held Oriental prints and some Korean stone sculpture, but was not quite so overpowering in its quality.

Beyond it, on a wide, collar-ing porch, two lab men were taking tape measurements of the floor area and the restraining wall’s height, while a third inspected the fat leaves of a rubber plant after fingerprint powder had been applied to each.

When he recognized me, he flipped his head in the direction of the wall.

“Haven’t pinpointed the exact spot where he went over yet, Boordy, so don’t go spraying your fingerprints all over the wall.”

“Charmed.”

“And walk around the chalked areas. We think we got some heel impressions of woman’s shoes that are recent. Floor’s been newly waxed.”

“Gotcha.”

Gradishar’s body lay sprawled below on what looked like a boat ramp of concrete. There was a staircase on the right which led down to the ramp and the beach.

“This okay to walk down?” I asked Mendoza.

He glanced up at me wanly “Left, right, left, right,” he said. The artist’s body lay face down on the concrete, but there



was no evidence of blood anywhere. I looked up and down the beach where, in both directions, teams of patrolmen were trudging out in search of something, anything, that might offer a clue to the killer.

The coroner's assistant was named Frankheimer, a young man I seemed to be encountering quite a bit lately. He was drawing all the really rough ones and I wondered if the luck of the draw wouldn't soon have him applying for a transfer to the chem lab.

"What are our young beachbombers doing?" I asked him.

"I sent them," he told me. "The patrol teams and the Medic One team got here before Homicide was called. It struck me that Gradishar's killer might have taken off up or down the beach. A hunch."

"But a good one," I said. "So they're checking the residents of the other homes along this stretch?"

"Si," said Frankheimer.

The surf was down on a day when the air seemed hushed. Not a single cloud marred the dome of blue sky overhead. But the lack of blood bothered me—it was almost as if the body of Thor Gradishar, washed across a vast ocean, had been struck by some monstrous wave to be washed this incredible

distance onto another man's boat ramp.

"Who found the body?" I asked.

"Resident to the south," he said, making no attempt to hide his disgust with the witness. "Amy Van Dyne, the actress. The *downhill* Amy Van Dyne, the actress."

"Frankheimer, we all have our little ups and our little downs."

"Well *this one* is making downers a career. I read the sheets, Boordy. But I got to give her one thing—she still has class enough to get herself tossed out of only the best places."

"Where is she now?" I asked him.

Frankheimer flicked a hand behind him toward some stone steps that lay half-hidden in thick shrubbery.

"She say how she came to find the body?"

"She was out on her balcony, looked down and across the beach, saw him and called us. She says."

"Meaning?"

"*Meaning*," said Frankheimer, "you believe any stories in the land of tinsel and tinker toys, you end up with the mind of a child. But that isn't my bag, Boordy. Until I take my sergeant's exam."

"About the body," I said.

"What can you tell me this early?"

"Boordy, I'm a cornucopia."

"For instance."

"For instance, Gradishar was likely dead even before he hit the concrete. No blood. No cranial or spinal damage."

"Nothing medically?"

"Maybe pathologically. Give me a good eighteen hours on this one. Point is, he represents perplexity. My point being—don't hang around any telephones waiting for quick and easy answers. You could atrophy. Now go away, Boordy and do whatever it is you do. I'll ride down in the wagon with this curious specimen and we'll see what sort of corpse we've got here."

I LEFT FRANKHEIMER to ponder over our curious corpse and crossed to the south, where I started up the long flight of stone steps which led to the home of Amy Van Dyne. I knew two disturbing facts about her life, if the lurid, L.A. tabloids could be believed even a little.

One, that she had a supreme skill for destroying order on television and motion picture sets—and two, that she had also a knack for breaking up celebrity marriages, or at least for putting them under heavy stress. My ascent, in fact, was

almost symbolic of the woman's present state.

She had hillside gardens, on both sides of the stairway. I recognized rhododendra, frangipani, coffee and avocado trees in flower, dahlias and sprawling agave attenuata from Mexico, all of it a rampant, chaotic jungle without care or order. It was not difficult to tie this disorder in with the general disrepair of the life of Amy Van Dyne.

I found her on a wide plank patio. She was sunning herself, face down, on a huge transparent pink waterbed. Within arm's reach on her right was a silver lazy Susan dressed with a crystal martini pitcher. A fine residue of gin near its mouth lay five inches from the mixture's present level.

Her pose struck me as one ill befitting the tragic death of a neighbor, but I said nothing of that judgment as she rolled slowly onto her left side to see who had come to interrupt her sunbath. Her nose and forehead were smeared with zinc oxide lotion. Hers was a stately face, obviously propped, prodded and underpinned to hold back the ravages of the years.

"Another of *them*, I suppose." Her voice was sharp, larded with imitative Bette Davis venom. "No, my home is *not* a harbor for a murderer—no, I

did *not* murder poor Thor myself—and no, I will *not* ‘come downtown’. That, I believe, successfully disposes of all your questions.”

“Ms. Van Dyne.” I spoke carefully to this leering former celluloid queen turned scourge of Sunset Boulevard. “We have developing here what could prove to be a very complicated investigation. Apparently, there were no witnesses to the murder of Thor Gradishar. That means the investigation will have to proceed solely along the lines of motive and accountability of probable suspects.”

“*Probable* suspects? Honey, if that’s going to be the scenario here, then you’d better begin scouting around for a little warehouse space, because Thor Gradishar, genius though he was, was also not a well-liked man.”

“Would that outsized group of anti-hero-worshippers by any chance happen to include yourself?”

“By all means, number me among his detractors. Thor was a living legend and a practicing louse. You get that for small openers without even having to advise me of my right to remain silent.”

“Could you expand upon ‘louse’, please?”

The sunglassed eyes turned upward. Then they swept



slowly down to meet mine. The glasses came off like some third-act revelation scene. The eyes were shadowed in rings but still bright and active.

“Legends, young man, have a nasty tendency to use people up. Thor Grandishar used people up. He went through them as you and I go through peanuts at a ball game.”

She sipped her martini—it seemed a gesture too careful and mannered.

“Legends will have their way. Legends consume so much faster than the rest of us, don’t you see? It is all use and abuse. With ideas, with adversaries—with women. But Thor Gradishar was a loveable juggernaut all the same. He moved in worlds wider and more complicated than just the world of art. And people were roadblocks in the path of his destiny.”

"You mean he had other occupations besides art?"

"He designed a race track in Florida, he created audiovisual communications systems for opera houses, civic auditoriums, theaters, he composed at least ten symphonies. You can begin to see that Thor Gradishar was quite unlike all the rest of us."

"He's *very much* unlike the rest of us now," I told her. I left her to walk to the edge of the wide patio.

Down on the beach Frankheimer was directing two coroner's attendants as they secured the body of Thor Gradishar on a stretcher. There was no doubt of the clear view. I walked back to the woman on the waterbed.

"You saw no one on the beach or in the house," I said to her.

"Nary a soul nor sound did I see or hear, officer."

"No shouts or screams."

"For an intelligent-looking young man, you don't listen well at all, do you?"

The sunglasses were donned again. The woman sought diversion in a dressy, chic-woman magazine.

"You didn't kill Mr. Gradishar, did you Ms. Van Dyne?"

"What a horrid, undignified thing to ask! No amount of

grace could be lent to that question with an answer."

"You won't stray far in case I should have other questions," I said.

"I haven't gone anywhere in six years, officer. I'm all gin, residuals and inertia."

I went back down the stairs, not eager at all to lock verbal horns with Amy Van Dyne again. I walked back to the spot where the body of Thor Gradishar had fallen, jumped, or was pushed. Frankheimer couldn't give me an answer to that riddle, nor could I provide one myself. No blood, not even a hunch about the probable cause of his death, no witnesses but his killer alone.

The house was a clutter of artifacts and art, but none of it suggested Thor Gradishar had endured any sort of death-struggle before his demise.

In the living room, a thick, oval coffee table of Spanish design displayed an empty highball glass and two whisky bottles, one empty, the second drained to less than the width of a hand. One drinker? Probably. More than one? A possibility. I went to the kitchen.

There, in an electric dishwasher, a second highball glass lay by its lonesome. Light was already casting a reflection of fingerprints upon it. For eliminating that sort of soiling,

electric dishwashers were terrible. I picked the glass up from the inside, opening my fingers like umbrella ribs, found a paper sack and dropped it inside. But I felt instinctively we weren't going to have points.

Two drinkers, not one—and the second not very careful about covering up the fact of his or her presence in Gradishar's home. But then, he or she had got Gradishar drunk to make him easier to murder and had got himself or herself drunk to make it easier to murder. Alcohol, while it is a fine catalyst for creating false courage, is also a fine moral anesthetic, for creating a false impression of self righteousness and perfection.

The patio lent no clues. The railing was waist-high. Gradishar could have fallen over it out of drunkenness. Or he could have been helped over it as easily. At this point, it was a coin-toss.

Nothing more to learn here about the crime, its victim or its perpetrator. Frankheimer held all the early answers—with the exception of the one in my paper sack. The answers Frankheimer delivered would be revealed in chemistry's own good time.

"THIS IS A GREAT time to call me, Frankheimer."

"Science is not an obedient servant to man's table of time. If I must work until one a.m. on your corpse, then I'll keep somebody else up over it, too," he said.

I fumbled for a table lamp button and then a note pad. A female palm slid from my chest.

"Go ahead, Frankheimer. I had to get up to answer the phone anyway."

"I'm doing you a favor, Boordy. I'm on leave-days tomorrow. You might not get this prelim before Christmas in the hustle, bustle and shuffle of paperwork, you understand. Unless, of course, you would like to endure the embarrassment of losing total track of your corpse."

"No, Frankheimer, I want them all accounted for."

"I thought you would, Lt. Boordy. Very well. Thorvald Toivo Gradishar, 75-166. No brain damage discovered, EKG negative."

"Which means no one clubbed him over the head and he didn't die from a coronary attack," I said to Frankheimer. "That leaves something like seventy thousand causes of death."

"I'll try to cut that figure down a little for you, Boordy," Frankheimer said. "We have multiple fractures of the legs and ankle bones, hinting strongly that if the deceased

was pushed from that balcony, he landed on his feet."

"Go on."

"Also, large quantities of alcohol were extracted from the deceased. Twenty-two fluid ounces, give or take an ounce or two for spillage. Canadian blend. Found primarily in the stomach cavity."

"How long a period of time would you estimate the deceased had been *consuming* all that alcohol?" I asked.

"Not so long that you could measure it with an hour glass. Fifteen minutes maybe—twenty at the most. This man either was bent on drinking himself to death or was under duress from someone forcing him into doing it."

"So what was the cause of death, Frankheimer? Or do I have to wait for it to come out in paperback?"

"If this were to come out in paperback, Boordy, somebody would have to come into your bookstore once a month to dust. Ready?"

"Braced."

"Your victim succumbed to hemophilia. The disease of kings. He was a bleeder."

That news jolted me back a pace. "And was the victim bleeding at the time of death?"

"It's what got him killed," said Frankheimer, without drama in his tone. "Hemo-

philiacs go through periods when they just can't stop bleeding. To combat it, they take a brand-new drug called cyro. It's a concentrate of something called Factor Eight, an isolated extract of blood plasma. It nearly always stops a bleed. But it has one bad property."

"What is that?"

"Some hemophiliacs build up antibodies against cyro."

"What does that mean?" I asked Frankheimer.

"It means that the concentrate isn't effective for long periods of time—in the case of our deceased, perhaps only a few hours, four at the most."

"Many people know that Thor Gradisher was a hemophiliac?"

"Hard to tell. But hemophiliacs aren't known to advertise their condition."

"Why not?"

"People begin to baby them," said Frankheimer. "They won't shake hands, slap them on the back, toss a football around with them, for fear of being responsible for starting an internal bleed. Hemophiliacs want desperately to be treated as normal human beings with a special medical problem that's treatable. The people at the Orthopedic Medical Center where Gradisher was being treated looked at every professional card in my wallet before they

were willing to show me his medical records."

I was doodling without realizing it, tracing and retracing a single word on a notepad. Misshapen and blackly grotesque, it lay like a mute curse across the sheet of white paper. The word was alcohol. I spoke it to Frankheimer softly, fearfully, as though it were a murder weapon pointed in my face. It was a murder weapon, the weapon that had killed Thor Gradishar.

"To hemophiliacs, alcohol is pure poison," said Frankheimer. "Most of them won't even allow it to be kept in their homes."

"Yet Thor Gradishar kept it," I told Frankheimer.

"Then his body could tolerate it. Maybe an ounce or two from time to time. But not the amount *we* found in him."

"What sort of effect would all that alcohol have on a hemophiliac?"

"Hikes the blood pressure, speeds the rate at which blood passes through veins, vessels and arteries, whose walls rupture. Ergo, internal bleeds at the slightest provocation."

"Could Gradishar have been induced to consume all that alcohol?"

"Induced? I was under the impression the deceased was alone."

"I found a lone high-ball glass in a dishwasher in the kitchen," I told him. "It suggests someone was in that house with Gradishar when he died, someone who made a bungled attempt to hide the fact of his visit."

"Was the glass washed? No matter. Fingerprints have to be scrubbed from surfaces. Running hot water and detergents over them won't completely destroy them, no matter what those kitchen advertisements tell you, a fact the deceased's visitor didn't know, obviously."

"If he was murdered, then his killer knew Gradishar was a hemophiliac," I said.

"And forced him to drink to force a bleed. But why pitch his body over a balcony? Dead is dead. A hemophiliac can bleed to death in a matter of minutes."

"Unless his killer wanted Gradishar's death to appear accidental—or to appear self-induced."

"Then all you can do now is wait for some fingerprints to be developed," said Frankheimer. "Not my specialty."

Two hours later, that special information was indeed developed. It was dispensed to me at nine a.m. the next morning by a fingerprint lab technician who'd spent most of the night hours assembling one complete

fingerprint from dozens on the highball that were smudged and incomplete.

"We've got a right index with enough points to make it evidentially valid in court, Boordy," he told me on the phone. "And we've also got something of a criminal record on its owner."

"*Something of a criminal record?* Don't play games with me, Havermeyer. Either a suspect *has* a criminal record, or he *doesn't have* a criminal record."

"Wrong gender, Boordy. It's a she. And it's still *something of a criminal record*. Disturbances of the peace, citations as a public nuisance, charges of assault, public drunkenness, all of the amusing little offenses logged from time to time against the Malibu set."

"Wouldn't be a fallen star named Amy Van Dyne, would it?" I asked.

"If it isn't," answered Havermeyer, "then there are two people walking around Los Angeles County with the same set of fingerprints."

"I'M NOT FOR an instant denying the fingerprints are mine, Lt. Boordy. I had a drink with Thor Gradishar."

"Yesterday morning?" I said to Amy Van Dyne.

Her smile was thinly polite.

"The previous evening. Around nine o'clock."

That certainly didn't go well with Frankheimer's approximated time of death, which was twelve hours later, at around nine a.m. the next morning. The woman's eyes, vague and bleary from alcohol, nevertheless held firmly to mind.

"Too bad fingerprints never tell us the time when they become applied," I said.

"I don't have to prove that in my defense, Lt. Boordy. You have the burden of proof squarely upon *your shoulders* for that."

The sun was almost at noon. To me, noon has always triggered in me a frenzy of work, because I am not an early starter. I could have worried over not putting in much effort to acquire additional suspects, but I didn't. For some reason, I knew I was in the company of Thor Gradishar's murderer. Confronting that certainty, there were simply no other places to go, no other suspects to see.

"I live pretty low on the hill now, Lt. Boordy," Amy Van Dyne was saying, "and I'm a drunk, besides. But never infer from these blue aspects that I am a stupid woman. Never infer that for an instant. I didn't kill Thor Gradishar."

"I had ample reason to kill



him, as did dozens of other people. If you like, I'll make you out a list, so you can begin to chalk up a roster of motives alongside their names. As for my own personal reasons for disliking Thor Gradishar, that is self-incrimination, Lieutenant. Someone else will have to point the gun and pull the trigger on me. I'll take my suicide from a gin bottle, thank you very much."

"Were you aware," I told her now, "that Mr. Gradishar was a hemophiliac?"

A spark flared in each of the boozy eyes—but whether it was born of surprise or of guilt I could not tell.

"Bleeder's disease? No, I didn't know. Had I known, I would have given blood in his name. Hemophiliacs can be a real drain on blood banks, I hear. Yes, Lt. Boordy. I hated Thor Gradishar, but I'm not without pity or compassion for someone who's ill."

"About your drink with him the evening before last," I said. "Just a single drink?"

"Yes. Thor had something to talk to me about. Yes, it was a personal matter. And no, I cannot divulge its nature."

"Did Thor Gradishar have a drink as well?"

"A small one, yes—a couple of ounces in water. Thor rarely drank. When he did, it was al-



ways in small amounts. Knowing now about his hemophilia, I can see why he shunned it like the plague. I understand alcohol can be deadly to a hemophiliac."

"It can," I told her, "and it was. Someone force-fed him enough alcohol to send a horse for the cure."

"Someone," came the echo. "By *someone*, you mean me. You suspect me."

I nodded.

"Then whoever did that to poor Thor," said Amy Van Dyne, "is making a pretty good run at framing me for it."

"Except for the fact that no one but you and Thor

Gradishar knew the fingerprints on that drinking glass in the dishwasher belonged to you."

This time the eyes flashed with an emotion that was neither surprise nor a revelation of probable guilt—a new reaction I could not identify. My father once told me that people wear not a single mask to hide their true intentions and feelings, but a series of them, layers of defenses to be peeled diligently and patiently, a layer at a time, until the final mask is torn loose to reveal the basic truths hidden beneath the lies and the subterfuges.

Coldly, Amy Van Dyne said, "You'd better leave now, Lt. Boordy. I insist upon that. I don't want to see you again, ever, unless it is to arrest me formally for the murder of Thor Gradishar. Go. *Now!* And don't come back."

I turned and walked from the beach front patio, the horrified face of the woman still photographed on the wall of my brain. I went along the side of the house, then across to the house of Thor Gradishar through a thin cut in some Japanese shrubbery.

The house inside looked as if its residents had gone on vacation. The paintings and the sculpture seemed to brood and

mourn in each other's dark shadows.

Still the horrified expression of Amy Van Dyne remained in my mind like a fright-mask on a string. Could it be that there existed other incriminating evidence against her? Evidence, along with the drinking glass, that had not been destroyed completely? Did that lie behind her evident terror?

The house's main floor was a series of rooms converted to Thor Gradishar's special employments. In one, a partially sculpted hulk of marble centered on a wooden pallet board on a floor strewn with tools and powdered with marble dust.

In another, a storm of canvases rested on easels, lay piled in corners like so much debris or hung on paint-spattered walls, leaning all around the room. The floor was a receptacle for palettes, for paint in cans, bowls and cups, for sable brushes that denoted the perfectionist in him.

In yet a third room, stood a frenzied of jigsaw puzzle mathematical forms—boxes of aluminum, steel circles within circles, geometric monsters in welded steel, torches, tanks and solder.

I could picture the artist as he had probably lived and worked, a maniac-genius tearing from room to room in inspi-

rational flight, the achetypal intellect with a creative brain too large for the volume in which it was housed.

At the rear of the main floor was a master bedroom. It appeared not to have been cleaned or arranged in years. Dirty clothes and bed linen lay heaped in every corner, like soiled snow driven on the wind. I collected the sketch-pads and notebooks, a stack of litter a foot thick. I found a nine-millimeter pistol in a drawer of a bureau, but it hadn't been fired recently, more probably never.

The second floor held guest rooms, bathrooms, a room containing nothing but a billiard table and, finally, a room whose obvious use was as a study.

The quiet sense of contemplative calm could almost be felt, even in the absence of the man for whom it was meant. Three walls of shelves were jammed with books on art, architecture, mathematics artifacts of Eastern and African origin, bric-a-brac picked up during travels.

The east wall was a floor-to-ceiling window, looking as though it had been specially designed by Gradishar to capture huge amounts of morning sunshine in the habit perhaps of titans like da Vinci, Michelangelo and Mozart, whose powers of creation were said to

have been at their strongest in the morning hours.

Before the massive window stood a battered and ancient mahogany desk. It held a gooseneck lamp, a bronze ashtray filled with the nubs of spent cigars, a green felt desk blotter, a squat aquamarine vase holding pencils and pens, a telephone, a desk memorandum that was two weeks behind the present.

Oddly, there was no litter here. No papers, no books, no notes in the accustomed disorder of Thor Gradishar's ex-istance. I got the feeling the desktop had been ordered deliberately, toward some purpose known only to its straightener. The neatness jarred.

NONE OF THE DESK's drawers was locked. Four, down either side. Inks, more pencils, a stapler, writing paper, some books whose pertinents required that they be kept within arm's reach. Nothing else. Nearby stood a four-drawer metal file cabinet. Sketches, graphs, prints, some letter files indicating by their tab markers that they contained correspondence from agents, critics, art professors, gallery owners and representatives, other artists and sculptors.

I went back to the desk and pulled open its center drawer.

The neatness continued to jar. The drawer held only three manila folders. One was tabbed **BILLS-RECEIPTS**, a second tabbed **GALLERY ADDRESSES—LOCAL/NATIONAL/INTERNATIONAL**, a third **CORRESPONDENCE/1974-75**. Still, the curious neatness persisted amid the surrounding frenzy and chaos.

The top two files were not at all remarkable, but the bottom file, the one that was holding Gradishar's correspondence, was more revealing than anything I had expected to encounter.

It contained letters that were highly personal and intimate. Some were from former art instructors and sponsors, but not many, each dealing with some aspect of Gradishar's professions—architectural contracts, analysis and criticism of the artist's work in progress, gallery negotiations from shows pending, gallery sales from shows gone by.

But the bulk of this file held letters and notes from Gradishar's female acquaintances. Their varied handwriting styles, their variety of colored inks and perfumes might have paled Casanova's mementos by comparison. Motion picture stars, female recording artists, daughters and divorced wives of magnates of business and industry in Los Angeles—

even a love letter from the wife of an internationally renowned painter. They represented a plethora of scintillating evocations of undying love. Thor Gradishar had indeed been a man of a wide variety of skills and talents.

I continued to scan these letters, my embarrassment and astonishment rising with the turn of each page. One among them leapt out at me for its possible pertinence in the death of Thor Gradishar. It appeared to have been written by none other than Amy Van Dyne herself—*appeared* because as yet I had no example of Ms. Van Dyne's handwriting against which to compare it.

But if a comparison should show the two signatures to be identical, then this letter would be as incriminating as a smoking pistol held in the hand of someone standing above a dead body.

"Dearest Thor," the letter began. "Thank you ever so sincerely for inviting me to last evening's modest gettogether, at which I tried to remain gay and charmingly informal to those of your friends I had not met and to the ones I've known these months.

"Among your new 'acquaintances', I found Ms. Ackerman particularly notable, inasmuch as she expressed, at one point

during the evening, a vociferous ardency for erotic art. Your—how shall I mention it without seeming overly gross?—*collection* is reputed to be wide and varied, a point you stressed with Ms. Ackerman more than once during the night.

"I know of Ms. Ackerman's professional accomplishments. In this town, darling, a female couldn't drop an earring into the avocado dip without everyone knowing by noon the next day which earring and how deep. In point of fact, the aforementioned Ms. Ackerman is one of those mute waitresses in an ersatz Italian eatery in a particularly stomach-turning daytime soaper called *Township Brighton*. In the evenings, she increases her life experiences by creating encounters which would make Xaviera Hollander look like a harmless uncle-kisser on New Year's Eve.

"My salient point in all this is that, at one rather protracted point in last evening's mad gaiety, you and Ms. Ackerman could not be seen anywhere among the guests. Some inquiry by myself turned up the disgusting information that Ms. Ackerman had been escorted upstairs to one of your 'gallery rooms'.

"While not commenting in depth on the sexually acrobatic

possibilities here, let me just say that nothing about your social life can any longer appal me. From personal experience, dearest Thor, I know you to be a sexual vacuum cleaner and a social garbage collector, so that aspect of your loosely wrapped existence is not the point of this letter.

"The key here is your special cruelty toward this writer, a situation which may not continue too much longer. I have a dwindling reputation to maintain, and a failing ego I must seek to bolster at every turn if I am to remain a sane woman in my declining years.

"A woman spurned, darling Thor, is a woman whose vindictive depths can never be sounded. Relatedly, I must tell you that I am aware of your frequent visits to a prominent Glendale physician. I am aware, also, of your dangerously unique illness. So many beautiful possibilities surrounding that illness come to mind, darling—so many.

"I am presently on the verge of considering one or another of those possibilities. I shall allow your own genius imagination to claim hold of these aspects, my darling. I won't be humiliated forever. The roller coaster of my career has been on the down-slope far too long now to allow much more descent.

"I'll close now, darling. Give the charming Ms. Ackerman my fond regards, of course. Tell her to be careful of spaghetti sauce on her nose and to keep a black dress handy. In this business, in this life, in this community, one never really knows.

"Amy."

The letter contained motive enough for murder ten times over, but not one incriminating remark. Criminal prosecutors run from substantive motives like they run from uncooperative witnesses, because motives do not bring convictions. Only hard evidence can do that. This letter, for all its lethal innuendo, provided almost no incriminating evidence at all. Threats are not long entertained by judges or juries in a court of law.

I WENT BACK to Amy Van Dyne's home, the letter undisturbed in its topmost position in the manila file under my arm.

"You again!"

"You need a maid to screen visitors."

"I need a maid, period. This had better be a pertinent return, Lt. Boordy, or I shall call your Chief of Detectives on the phone and rain the hell all over your back-and-forth parade."

I laid the file on the coffee table and opened it.

"I've found a letter among Mr. Gradishar's correspondence and I think you ought to read it," I said. "I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't touch it with your fingers."

"Ah, yes, Lt. Boordy. The ever-telltale fingerprints." She read the letter in silence, turning the pages carefully with clinical index finger and thumb.

She began to laugh long before her reading was complete.

"Why, that loveable fake!"

"I'm not following you, Ms. Van Dyne."

"I didn't write this letter, Lt. Boordy. Thor wrote it."

I still wasn't following. "*Thor Gradishar* wrote it?" I said.

"A genius-piece of architecture. But then, architecture was one of Thor's many talents. Perfect! No handwriting expert would dispute so much as a common."

"Why would Thor Gradishar fabricate a love letter?"

"I am supposed to be his murderess by it."

"We have a drinking glass with your fingerprints on it, Ms. Van Dyne," I told her. "It indicates you may have killed him by forcing him to drink large amounts of alcohol, which would have very neatly triggered a massive bleed."

"A—bleed?" With incredulity.

"You didn't know Thor Bradishar was a hemophiliac," said.

"Lieutenant, we are both up on our waists for traveling in the same circle. We are making cuts. I've already *told you*. I didn't know Thor was a hemophiliac. Just as I've already told you I did *not* have a drink with him the night he died and that I did *not* write his letter."

"This reference to his love affairs," I said, changing into a new gear. "Is it accurate?"

"Thor had many women, yes—and the nymphlet-starlet. Ms. Ackerman, as well." Her voice grew suddenly cold. I could nearly feel its chill on me. "I will say no more on this subject unless I am forced to—unless I am arrested for Thor Bradishar's murder and am forced to face a court of law."

She rose then, turned and walked out of the room. I saw her disappear onto the patio. I sat a minute pass so that she could collect herself and her thoughts, then followed. She was looking at the ocean. The surf was crashing onto giant monoliths of black rock. The sky was bleak and gray and Los Angeles would get rain before this day was over.

"Ms. Van Dyne? We have to talk about this."

"I have a lawyer, Lt. Boordy," she said, not turning to face me. "He isn't much. He takes divorce cases—and libel suits in connection with those cheap exposé magazines the people of our town seem to be so fond of. And he bails celebrity drunks out of jail with a minimum of publicity. My point is, I will *not* malign the character of a dead man unless it becomes absolutely necessary."

"Ms. Van Dyne, you are forcing me to that alternative."

Suddenly she whirled. The hatred in her eyes exploded. "No, you are forcing *me* to that alternative, Lieutenant. A good man is dead. A rat, an obsessive-compulsive genius who devoured people like food—but a good man when both sides of the slate are checked and totted."

"But your silence may lead you straight into a courtroom."

"You haven't evidence against me strong enough for a conviction and you know it. Look at this letter. What a fraud! Look at the *date*—six months ago. And not a wrinkle or dog-ear *anywhere*. Where did you find it in the file, Lieutenant?"

"Where?" I asked.

"Where, where, *where*! My goodness, you aren't terribly competent at the nuances of your job! Where in the *file*?

Top, bottom, middle? *In* sequence? *Out of* sequence. Smack dab on the *top*, where you would be sure not to overlook it?"

She was right. It was a slender point I had completely overlooked. The letter had been placed directly *on top* of the others in the thick file, not chronologically, as one would expect in a day-to-day file like his—and its perfect condition was another thing I had missed. Why were letters received more recently in worse condition than one ostensibly written months before?

There was something *else* about this letter's validity, or its lack of validity. The answer was there for my eyes to read and decipher—but it was Amy Van Dyne whose eyesight and insight were shown to be quickly superior.

"Let me tell you something about women you may not know, Lieutenant. We are very private animals. We won't discuss bridge hands we've lost, we rarely take out our garbage unsacked, we seldom confess our weight, our age or our heartaches. And we are private about one other thing.

"We are private about our correspondence. Hand-delivered or sent through the U.S. mails, we almost always fold our personal letters. *Fold*, Lt. Boordy.

Now take a look at this perfect virginally white, uncreased letter I am suppose to have written to Thor Gradishar. A very *personal*, highly *evocative* letter at that. If there are women among the jury of my peers these little inconsistencies won't be overlooked."

"Why?" I said to her then the only logical question I could think of that had not been asked. "Why go to these lengths? Why the elaborate suicide?"

The sea seemed for the moment to rest. Still, she would not turn toward me. "In my lifetime of self-indulgence," she said, "Thor was my one restraint. I'd come upon him far too late, don't you see.

"I was into my martyrdom and martinis when Thor Gradishar moved in next door. He was into world-conquering and womanizing. That couldn't be womanized by him or by any other man was probably the first defeat, small or vast, in his entire life. After that, it was all downhill for both of us as an 'item', as the columnists put it.

"But Thor had persistence. He sent over gifts—bourbon bon-bons, things for my fingers and things for my toes. He even did a ten-foot nude of me in oil from memory. It's somewhere in the basement, wedged be



ween a dozen cases of wine he ent over I never uncorked."

"He loved you?"

"As much as he loved fifty percent commissions. But alcohol has a nasty habit of making its obedient servant treat all other aspects of her life with indifference. I was the one thing in the world Thor Gradishar could never acquire and he grew to know it. So he planned it that neither of us could have anyone ever again.

"I was fit for framing and it suited his needs. So he laid his little plans for me, then forced himself all that alcohol and itched himself over his patio and bled to death."

"He committed suicide? Is that what you're saying?"

"What we wish to be," said my Van Dyne, "we shall be in the end. I would, of course, appreciate it if the official investigation showed this as a murder unsolved. Suicide would have many of Thor's friends and admirers in terrible straits."

"How would they be left in terrible straits?"

"Well, if a genius cannot meet life with a sure and steady grip," she said wistfully, "what hope is there for us mere mortals? You treat this matter that way, Lt. Boordy—for everyone's sake."

I left her standing there, still

looking out to sea as though meanings and answers were expected in on the next tide.

I put it down as a murder and the death of Thor Gradishar languished unsolved for almost two years as an open case. The prices for his unsold paintings and sculptures soared almost 200 percent during that period. Thor Gradishar was a deceased master well-selected.

AMY VAN DYNE died six months after Thor Gradishar's death became an inactive case. The cause of her death was noted as a "malfunction of the liver" in a modest obituary recounting her early stardom and film work. Her funeral was sparsely attended, her eulogy so brief and impersonal I walked away from the site of her grave in shame.

Driving back downtown through the grimy fog that shrouded the Harbor Freeway, I made a mental note to add a clause to my will, charging my executor with giving out the complete unvarnished truth about the manner of my own death. In California, far too many deaths of late seem cause for fiction and fantasy. I would still pay a few bucks to see it exude from a screen in a movie theater, but I'll be damned if I let it take hold of my own life and times.

# CLEOTA

*Ostensibly, the assignment Mrs. Patterson gave Sam Train was to prove that her father was murdered. The way things worked out, Train was fortunate to get through it alive.*

by ERNEST SAVAGE

THREE DAYS AGO on Monday I got a margin call from my broker and I was expecting another today, Thursday. Otherwise I wouldn't have taken the case that Mrs. Gail Patterson offered me.

I lied to her on the phone. I told her my fee was \$200.00 a day plus expenses, and my minimum retainer a thousand. It was a bald lie. Anytime I collect more than \$100.00 a day I'm ashamed of myself and I've never charged a retainer in my life. But my little entry on the stock market had zigged when it should have zagged and there

was an arrogance in her voice, an imperiousness, that fired my natural chauvinism.

It was in her eyes, too, an hour later when she sat across from me at a table in Drago's. I'd asked her to meet me at Drago's for lunch because it was three doors away from my broker's and I'd told her to bring her money.

Her voice was coldly controlled as she opened the conversation. "Christ Himself," she said, "returned to this earth would not be worth two hundred a day, Mr. Train—no would Our Blessed Savior.



have the shamelessness to ask for it. But I understand that's the standard fee in this godless town, and I understand further that you're both diligent and effective."

She couldn't have known, nor could I, that her tasteless reference to the Saviour was half-way prophetic, as well as offensive. My dislike of her took a quantum jump and I took refuge in the mordancy I'd been developing all week.

"I have this gold star that I usually wear on my forehead," I said, "but Drago makes me check it at the door. Infradignitatem, he calls it. What do you want me to be diligent and effective about?"

She was a modish woman of about 35, I would guess, 5-10 years younger than I. Her eyes and hair were dark, her ivory skin flawless. Her clothes were expensive and the arrogance I'd heard in her voice was obviously bone deep.

"My father was murdered by his wife," she said bluntly. "I want you to prove it."

I barely heard her. My eye, inner-compelled, fell upon the handsome leather purse she'd brought with her. In a trice, she took from it a thick packet of traveler's checks and began signing her name on the bottom line of one after another until she got to ten. With mute show

she ripped them out and shoved them across the table at me and asked if she could now have my attention.

"You can," I said reluctantly. The checks were worth a hundred dollars apiece. They would be mine for an hour at the most. A margin account for the Devil's work. "Tell me about it, Mrs. Patterson."

"My father was Dr. James London," she said, and paused as if the name should have sent a thrill of recognition up my spine. It didn't. "He was a soil scientist at the University of California at Davis until he retired a year ago. He bought a fifty-acre farm in the valley near Benson in Vallejo County—it's about sixty miles from here, north and east."

"I know where it is."

"My father was a great man," Mr. Train, and a great teacher. He was a pioneer in soil conservation techniques and the principles of organic farming." She paused again. Her chin was still rigidly high and her dark eyes steady on mine, but she was letting me see that she felt his loss. It seemed calculated.

"He wanted to develop a model farm at Benson," she resumed, "using purely organic methods, biological pest controls instead of insecticides, natural sources of plant nutrients instead of manufactured. It was

his dream. He wanted to create in Eden, an oasis of sanity in a world gone mad on chemicals."

"You're quoting, aren't you?"

"Yes." It didn't offend her. "It was all in a letter he wrote me—the last letter he wrote me."

"When?"

"Six months ago. I was in Rome. It was the letter in which he told me he'd married his woman, this woman who killed him." She fumbled in her purse and brought out a coloroid picture. "This woman. Her name is Cleota."

"Wow!" I breathed. She was stunning. The picture showed her standing tall and straight, her hands gripping the handle of a pitchfork against which she leaned slightly forward. Her face was long and lean, strong-awed, framed by short unruly hair, pale blue eyes seeming to glitter with force, a show of strong white teeth between lightly parted lips.

She wore a plain sleeveless dress open at the throat, belted at the waist, very little thrust of breasts, arms with hard-looking biceps. She seemed to want to step right out of the picture at you.

"Wow!" I repeated. "Jiggle one of her glands and she'd turn into a man, wouldn't she? Cleota what?"

"Macklin. Father said she

was from Arkansas, farm-born. Father said she was the perfect mate to see his dreams to fruition. I'm quoting again."

"How did she kill him and why isn't she in jail for it?"

"Butolism. She fed him poisoned tomatoes that she'd canned herself."

"When?"

"Seven weeks ago yesterday. I didn't know about it until last week. I'd not heard from father since the letter six months ago and I was getting worried. I tried to phone, but got no answer—over a period of five days, Mr. Train. So I called an acquaintance in Davis and discovered my father had died seven weeks ago."

"I repeat—why isn't Cleota in jail?"

"She claimed it was accidental. She claimed they were the first tomatoes she'd ever canned and she didn't do it right. That's what the sheriff told me last Tuesday. A farm girl, Mr. Train! The sheriff said the official decision was death by misadventure!"

"Maybe it was."

"I don't believe it!"

"Maybe I don't believe it, either," I said, glancing again at the picture, "but opinion isn't evidence. Have you met the woman?"

"No. But I—saw her."

"When?"

"Yesterday morning. I went out to the farm with the intention of confronting her. I know," she said, noting the slight shake of my head, "it was a foolish thing to do, but I feel so strongly about my father's death that I wasn't using good judgment. Maybe I'm still not."

I smiled. "But you didn't confront her."

"No. I went to the front door, but she didn't answer my knock, so I went around behind and she was in the yard digging a grave. She—"

"A what?"

"It looked like a grave, Mr. Train. She was in it up to her waist, throwing great clumps of earth over her shoulder. She—"

"Where's your father buried?" I asked.

"In Davis—next to my mother. We have a family plot there."

"What made you think it looked like a grave?"

"Because it didn't look like anything else!" She was arrogantly firm about it.

"Okay, so then what'd you do?"

"Turned around very quietly and went away. She frightened me." She lit a cigaret quickly, expertly. It was a Gauloise *Disque Bleu*, French. The movements of her pampered hands were graceful. She had style

and a visible aura of power. She didn't look as though she frightened easily and I said so loudly.

"I don't usually, but this was not a usual situation. She is not a usual woman."

"Is she as big as she looks in the poloroid?"

"Bigger. She looked nine feet tall to me, Mr. Train, even standing in that hole."

"Call me Sam."

"Why?"

I shrugged. "Well, don't then." A waiter glided toward us, but I waved him off. It was improbable that this woman and I could break bread peacefully and I don't like to eat at a fight at the same time. Besides, Drago's is expensive and I needed to save every dime I could for Stagger, Stumble, Clutch and Grind, or whoever they were down the street. The silence became thunderous before I sighed and said, finally, "Tell me about Rome, Mrs. Paterson."

Her brows lifted haughtily. "My husband is a member of the American Embassy staff there. We've lived there for three years, but—" Her dark eyes shifted for the first time.

"But what?"

"We're divorcing." Her right hand made a little throwaway gesture. "I established residence in Reno the first of the

week, Mr. Train, but that is hardly germane."

"Probably not," I said. She had class and I approve of class, but there was more to her than met the eye or ear. I said bluntly, taking a guess, "Cleota inherited the whole bundle, didn't she?"

"What?"

"Before he died, he made over the whole estate to her, didn't he?"

"Yes." She admitted it grimly.

"How much does it amount to?"

"A quarter million, at least."

"Any other heirs, or potential heirs?"

"No."

"Is your husband a rich man, Mrs. Patterson?"

"No, he is not."

"So—"

"None of this is germane, Mr. Train."

"The hell you say, madam!" I held up a hand. "Don't get mad, but let me put it this way—if your father had been poor as a church mouse, you'd still be in Rome, wouldn't you?"

"Naturally I want the money! But that doesn't alter the facts!"

"The fact is, Mrs. Patterson, that Cleota has been declared innocent of malicious intent, or whatever." I spread my hands. "What do you want me to do? Go

out there and make her confess to something she didn't do?"

"I was told you were resourceful, Mr. Train."

"But not creative, Mrs. Patterson. I don't create evidence out of whole cloth or beat confessions out of innocent people." The stack of checks was on the table before me. It was less painful than I thought it'd be to shove it back, but her hand stopped mine.

"Go see her, at least," she said earnestly. "Please, Mr. Train—Sam." Her hand tightened on mine. It was cold. "See Sheriff Baldwin. Talk with him, he's not all that sure himself. Keep the money. I'm sure you'll change your mind when you've talked to her. And, Sam, if you can prove she did it, there'll be a two thousand dollar bonus for you."

"Out of the estate?"

"No, at once. I have resources of my own."

"I'll bet you do," I said. I put the checks in my pocket and stood up abruptly, half a beat ahead of her. The waiter, hovering imperiously near, was displeased and I touched my forelock to him as I passed.

Outside, she put her hand on my arm and said, "Mr. Train, dear, you left your gold star in there." Her smile, when she used it, was a weapon.

"I have an idea, Mrs. Patter-

son, that I left more than that in there."

Her fingers tightened on my arm. "You'll see her tomorrow?"

"Is it that important?"

"I want it over with."

"All right, I'll see her tomorrow."

She got in a cab and headed for Union Square and I turned left and started walking toward Flinch, Flare, Diddle and Drag, or whatever they call themselves, and wondered who'd told her I was both diligent and effective.

Twenty-four hours later, I'd have had his head for it.

I'D TALKED TO SHERIFF BALDWIN a half-dozen times when I was on the San Francisco Police Force, and he remembered me at once. He was a small, tidy man who had the reputation of running a good clean shop. I was in his office at 9:30 the next morning with a cup of hot coffee in my hand, but he wasn't able to offer me much of anything else.

"We've had three cases of botulism in the last nine-ten months," he said. "Two deaths. All from home canned tomatoes. All accidental, naturally."

"Mrs. Patterson said you had some reservations about the London death. Do you?"

"I have reservations about all

of them, Sam. If I wanted to kill someone with a nearly perfect chance of getting away with it, I'd try botulism."

"Clostridium Botulism," I said. "That's its formal name, as no doubt you know. I looked it up yesterday afternoon and it's about as mean a way to kill as there is. You think this Cleota woman is capable of it?"

"My impression of Mrs. London is that she's capable of anything."

"I hear she's big."

"She's a giantess. She's as big as you are, Sam, and as powerful looking." He shook his head. "And she's got the damndest set of eyes I've ever seen—cold as marbles in the snow."

"A killer's eyes?"

"Maybe. Who's aren't? Sociopathic eyes, to say the least, but the last time I looked into them they were full of the tears of anguish, and very convincing, too. The inquest decision was death through misadventure. There was no other way it could go."

"So now she's a quarter million dollars richer. Not bad for six months or so."

"I agree. But according to London's lawyer, he changed his will without her knowledge. Everyone we talked to said he was thoroughly happy with her. Some men go for outsized women."



"How come the daughter wasn't notified of his death?"

"No idea. Until she came in here the other day, I didn't know he had one."

"But Cleota knew, Elliot."

"Presumably. Ask her about it when you get out there. Let me know if the answer's interesting."

"I will." I sipped coffee while he lit a cigaret. "How much checking were you able to do on her? Cleota?"

"Not much. She lived in Davis for three years—that's where she met Doctor London. Before that, thirteen years in Dallas, but no criminal record anywhere. We're undermanned, Sam, but if I'd had any reason to I'd have gone further with it."

"How old is she?"

"Forty-three, but doesn't look it."

"Mrs. Patterson said she was born in Arkansas."

"Why not?" Baldwin shrugged and smiled. "Some people are."

"But you didn't check that out?"

"No. No reason to. Give me one and I will."

"Well hell," I said finally, "it's a fee. I'd better go earn it."

London had started to make a showplace out of it, but had run out of time. The house, a two-story clapboard, vintage

1910 or so, freshly painted white, gleamed behind a cluster of ancient oaks a hundred yards off the road. The driveway turn-in was flanked by two new stone gateposts with handsome wrought-iron lanterns atop. But no gates or fence—he hadn't gotten that far.

I turned in and drove up the well-cambered drive, bending sharply left at a screen of Toyon bushes to the front of the house. A small Chevy pick-up was parked near the veranda steps, hidden from the road. I got out and looked at it with interest. It was a mess, all four fenders battered in, a thick coating of dust covering the body and the camper shell roped precariously on the back. It had been places and hit things.

The front seat and floor of the cab were littered with what appeared through the dirty windows to be religious pamphlets and tracts. Four stickers, spaced along the lumpy rear bumper proclaimed that *Jesus Saves*.

I put my hand on the hood of the truck. It was warm, still warm; and the license plates, barely readable under grime, were the red and white of Arkansas.

I went up the broad veranda steps to the front door and knocked. The door was open

behind a screen. Then I called Mrs. London's name twice, but heard no answering sound. Then I opened the screen door and went in.

There was nobody in the house. I sketched quickly through the ground floor and then went upstairs and looked through the four bedrooms and bath, one unmade bed. The attic door was locked. Then I went back downstairs to the kitchen, paused in the doorway to survey it, a beautiful room in a beautiful house. But I was nervous, very uncomfortable, an intruder.

The kitchen had been completely modernized and was designed for large-scale food processing. An institutional-size oven, flanked by tiled counters, was on the wall to my right. Ahead of me, beneath a large open window facing the back yard, was a triple-basined sink flanked by more tiled counters on which were placed a microwave oven and an array of electrical kitchen aids.

Centered in the wall to my left was a vault door leading into what was probably a cold-storage room. Overhead, fluorescent lights, not on at mid-day, were countersunk in the ceiling, and in the middle of the big room 4 wood chairs were set around a golden-oak table that must have weighed a

Two stained coffee cups were on the table and between them an opened black-leather dispatch case that had disgorged a mass of phamplets and papers and envelopes, variously tattered and yellowed with age. At the right end of the sink counter a framed opening led to the utility room, at the far end of which was a back door to the yard.

Tight-legged, I stepped to the cold-room door, looked through its window at darkness, softly pressed down the levered handle, pulled it open and went on inside.

A wave of welcome cool air swept across my face. I flipped on a light just inside the door and saw to the right, suspended from the ceiling, four cruel-looking meat hooks, empty, but waiting.

To the left was another insulated door that swung open easily and revealed a small room lined with shelves on which were rows of processed peaches and apricots, a wicker tray of fresh-picked lettuce and at least 20 quarts of tomatoes lined up in a bravura display of domestic art. If she hadn't had the art before her husband died, she'd acquired it since.

"The damn fool!" I said aloud. It was a bold dare, all that stuff there.

Still stiff-legged and ner-

vouse—I badly missed the warrant I'd have had were I still a cop. This was pure breaking and entering—I closed the vault door and pussyfooted to the window over the triple-basined sink.

To the left in the big fenced yard, two hundred feet away, was a brand new, all-metal barn, gleaming in the sun. Between the house and the barn was the kitchen garden in full bloom and, at the nearest edge of the garden, the hole Mrs. Patterson had seen Cleota digging. Mrs. Patterson had said it looked like a grave, and Mrs. Patterson couldn't have been more right.

Whose grave? The question crossed my mind and clung to the edge.

Beyond the barn and yard, extending away from me in precision rows was a grove of mature walnut trees, their branches arching over lanes of brown earth raked smooth and clean as velvet. I was gazing at it with a city man's awed eye when I heard the first sound and saw movement for the first time.

The sound was a kind of wail, the movement the body of a man in black easing to the ground in the distance of the grove. I crouched and squinted through the window. The man was on his knees, his arms ex-

tended upward. I couldn't see his head.

I held my breath and listened; the wail—*his* wail—had feathered back into silence, but then I heard the unmistakable cadence of ritual prayer, an impassioned invocation for something only God could give, His name repeated twice, dimly but clearly in the cottony silence of noon. The black, stick-like arms of the man sawed spasmodically at the sky.

Then I saw Cleota. She emerged from behind the thick trunk of a tree and stood in front of the man; talking to him, one fisted hand swooping up and freezing in the air over his head. Then she turned abruptly and walked deeper into the grove and the man got up and followed, both disappearing from my view.

I unclamped my hands from the stainless steel rim of the sink and stepped back to the table and sat down in one of the heavy oak chairs. I'd gained a glimmering of the drama unfolding in the grove and wanted suddenly to look at the stuff in the dispatch case.

I had a mental picture of the man arriving here from Arkansas, half, maybe three-quarters of an hour ago. I saw him and Cleota sitting here, drinking coffee and starting a discussion that the kitchen had been too

small to hold, that was still going on, fortissimo, out in the grove.

Most of the contents of the case were religious tracts, written by the Reverend Myron Macklin. One of them, entitled, *The Ineffable Grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ* was typical of their thrust. Cleota's maiden name was Macklin. Myron would be a brother, father, cousin.

More interesting was a full page of the *Sacramento Bee*, dated seven weeks ago. It had been folded down to the size of a business envelope and told, among other things, of the passing of Doctor James London of botulism poisoning. He rated two columns, ten inches and a fuzzy picture. The only survivor mentioned was his bereaved widow Cleota.

Much more interesting was a one-column newspaper clipping, undated, but time-stained to the color of café-au-lait, that told of the sudden deaths by botulism poisoning of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Macklin of Samsonville, Arkansas. It looked more than ten years old. Bereaved survivors, son Myron, daughter Cleota.

"The damn fool!" I said again.

I wanted water. I got up and got a glass and filled it at the sink. Hell! if you're going to break and enter you might as

well make yourself at home. I'd just put the empty glass on the counter when I saw them approaching the utility room entrance, 20 feet away, she in front, striding fast.

Without thinking about it, I ran for the cold-room door, eased it open, ducked inside and closed it just short of the latch. I'd been sloppy, I should have been watching for them to come from the right. I was covered with sweat, now rapidly turning cold.

He was half a head taller than she, a lanky stick of a man, dressed in black from hat to shoes, a black string tie dangling down the front of a dirty white shirt. Thin gray face, her intense icy eyes. He put his hat on the table and stared at it mournfully. She was frowning at the glass I'd left on the sink. *Man!* had I been sloppy.

Now he looked at her. "Why do you resist?" he said, as though bewildered by it. "We are all sinners, Cleota, we were born into sin." I could hear him clearly through the crack in the door. "To sin is human, even unto the sin of murder, but there is no sin beyond divine forgiveness. It is so simple, His grace is so sure. Why do you resist?"

"What has divine forgiveness got to do with jail?" she said in

a strong, calm voice. "You want me to go to jail, Myron, and I won't do that. I told you. I wouldn't do that years ago. You shouldn't have come."

She was leaning now against the sink, her eyes nearly in line with mine, but I was in the dark, a foot back of the double-glazed window.

"Man extracts his justice in terms of years," Myron went on, "God in terms of forever—eternity, Cleota! You were born in Christ, raised in Christ, you defy Him at the risk of eternal damnation. You *know* that, Cleota—my sister—my sister in Christ, I cannot let you do this to yourself. Repent! In Christ's Holy Name, *repent!*"

His arms were raised again in supplication, but she had moved, circled him to the table in the center of the room and was looking down at the array of papers. I'd not put them back the way I'd found them.

"Who sent you the Sacramento *Bee*?" she asked suddenly. Her eyes seemed to flick across mine to his and I stepped a pace deeper into the small room.

His arms fell despairingly to his sides, disdaining the question. He closed his eyes and then dropped slowly to his knees, as he'd done in the grove, his hands now clasped before him in prayer.

"Oh, Lord," he said, "in Your might and wisdom and boundless love, send unto this poor lost lamb the bounty of contrition..." His voice boomed on, trained to fill temples and tents. I was fascinated. He was good, the big voice ringing with honest belief, and I was pulling for him, wanting his will to break hers, but it was no contest.

SHE TURNED FROM HIM, wheeled out of my sight to the right and, in a count of three, the vault door, a yard in front of me now, was pushed closed and his voice was cut off in mid-word. After another count of three, I heard the hum of a fan and felt the stirring of air around my ears.

I took a deep breath and cursed myself. I'd been a damn fool from the start. But the jig was up now for sure and I flicked on the light and looked out the window. Myron was still on his knees, arms now raised high. I couldn't see Cleota. I grabbed the inside handle of the vault door and tried to move it, but it didn't budge. It was either broken or there was a trick to it that I didn't know and didn't have time to learn.

I shivered. The needle in the temperature gauge behind me dropped from 39 to 38 as I

watched it. I turned back to the window and saw Cleota, now leaning against the counter next to the big stove, the corners of her mouth lifted in a slight smile, her eyes on mine. She had a blue-steel, long-barrelled revolver in her hand, a forty-five. The only sound I could hear was the hum of the fan overhead.

I cursed myself again and banged hard on the door with the side of my fist. Cleota's smile grew by an erg, but Myron didn't stir, his eyes still squinched shut, lost in the passion of prayer. I banged again, harder, kept it up until his eyes fluttered open finally, blinking in bewilderment, searching the room for the source of the sound.

He got awkwardly to his feet, glanced wildly at his sister, then at me. Cleota had moved the gun out of sight behind a fold of her dress. I tried to warn him, but it was no use.

"*She's gonna kill you!*" I shouted, but he couldn't hear. He was coming toward me, his eyes wide in confusion and wonder. He glanced once again at his sister and then his face filled the glass of the door and I tried to tell him to run, but he couldn't hear me.

The shot was a dull thud, like something heavy dropping to the floor in the next room.

His eyes, a foot in front of mine, blinked once, widened, glazed, closed, and then opened slowly with the knowledge of death ashine in their depths. I groaned.

I'd seen men die before, but never like this, never so close, so silent. His eyes blinked again, then winced—there must have been a brief hard pain—then seemed to smile. His lips moved soundlessly and then his face slid slowly from my view and the door lurched beneath my hand. He'd grasped the handle in a reflexive attempt to stay on his feet, to stay alive, and from that moment on it was all reflexive with me, too, and for almost exactly the same reasons.

I crouched low, put my shoulder to the door and shoved with all my strength. I'd last seen Cleota still standing against the counter on the opposite side of the room and I had a simple plan—to come out low, get under the oak table in the center of the kitchen and ram it against her. It worked up to a point.

I heard shots, it seemed like a dozen. Myron—I told myself as his body got shoved aside—was dead, out of it, not caring. The next few moments were a smash and tangle of raw violence. I got my hands on a leg of the table and heaved it up

and away toward Cleota, but it missed her.

She'd ducked to the left near the sink and was crouching now, moving my way, the gun in her right hand held by the barrel, her eyes cold holes of pure murder. I grabbed a chair and slung it at her as she came. It bounced off her hunched shoulder and then the butt of the .45 smashed my nose. There were no rules in this room now.

I drove a looping right fist into her belly and caught the gun in my left hand as it came down again. It fell out of my grasp, slid across the floor. We were both standing now and a left hook caught me in the eye and sent me reeling over a fallen chair. I was dazed, sucking bloody air through my mouth, coming up off my knees, turning toward her.

She held the microwave oven in both hands over her head, her teeth bared with the strain, a tigress. I scrambled to my right and heard the oven crunch into the floor where I'd been. Crouching, I went at her, cornered her against the sink counter and began to smash away. I wanted only to kill and drove blows at her with every ounce of strength I had—and got almost as good as I gave.

She was on the floor, her chest heaving, her face a pulp, bloody spittle bubbling around



her mouth. I was on my hands and knees, the rage in me gone, given way to a pain and fatigue like none I've ever known. I pushed raggedly to my feet and staggered to the sink.

I turned on the water and let my head fall forward into the flow and hang there until my breathing evened out. My nose wouldn't bear touching, my right eye was swollen shut,

something was wrong with my left hand. I turned and faced the room, red water dribbling down my front. The place was a shambles. I couldn't believe it—no two people could have made such a mess—.

Cleota had rolled onto her right side. A drawer had been pulled out of the counter, scattering knives, forks and spoons every which way. Cleota's left hand was moving toward a small paring knife. I watched her big bloodied paw grasp it, pull it toward her.

With tremendous effort I moved two steps to my left and drove a shoe as hard as I could into the side of her head. But I was slow. Her hand had been faster; the knife was an inch deep into the calf of my leg, and, looking down at it, feeling a new and separate pain, I began to cry. I didn't want to be what I was, a live human being. I wanted to be dead and out of it, away from these animals, this cage.

I cried, but it didn't last long—it never does. Cleota was unconscious now, a defeated enemy. I had whipped her and I couldn't suppress a savage joy in victory. We are risen apes, as someone said, not fallen angels. We have a long, long way to climb yet and only rungs of hope to reach for—.

The phone was on the oppo-

site wall of the room. I went to it slowly, dialled operator, told her I wanted the sheriff, stood there God knows how long until he came on, told him to get out here, let the phone fall, dangling to the floor.

Myron was well and truly dead. I bent over painfully and laid my good hand on his quiet heart. I mourned him. he had saved my life, such as it had become in a few moments of utter violence. The joy of victory in me had died.

I wandered through the wreckage of the room, picked up a letter I hadn't seen before from the strewn mess, put a chair on its feet, slumped into it and looked again at the letter, cocking one good eye. It was from Myron to Cleota, dated five days ago.

*I and the Lord Jesus Christ are coming to save you, it read. We'll be there Firday. Hold it in your heart, dearest sister, that there is no sin beyond His knowledge nor His forgiveness. The time has come to make your peace and save your soul.*

*Your loving brother, Myron, trusting in the Lord.*

I let it fall from my hand. Cleota had moved, groaned, drawn herself into a fetal coil, bloodied hands gathered to battered mouth. Saved? Saved for civil vengeance, that was all. But maybe the rage had passed



om her as it had passed from  
e. Maybe she was purged,  
eansed. Maybe his trip, his  
eath had done their work.

I heard voices at the front of  
e house, the screen door slam,  
otsteps. It was an awful effort  
o raise my head and look at  
e door as Sheriff Baldwin en-  
ered and stopped dead in his  
acks, his mouth dropping.

"Jesus H. Christ!" he whis-  
ered.

I stared at him a long time.  
Very possibly," I said. "Very  
possibly."

HE ASKED ME TO MEET her at  
rago's again because she said  
e'd heard their scampi was  
e best in town and she loved  
scampi. On her, she said.

I was late—but then, I'd been  
te to everything the past five  
ays. She had a double martini  
her hand when I arrived and  
illed a little when she saw  
y face.

"I see," she said, trying to be  
fable, "that you checked your  
old star again, Sam, but not  
e bandaids. Was your nose  
ally broken?"

"It was. It is."

Sheriff Baldwin told me he  
ulled a knife from your leg  
hen he found you. Is that  
ue?"

"It is."

"Sam." Her hand crept half  
ay across the table. "He told

me he'd never seen anything  
like it, she must have gone  
completely mad. He said he and  
a deputy had trouble picking up  
the microwave oven she threw  
at you. I can't believe it."

"Believe it," I said. I made no  
attempt to meet her hand and  
she withdrew it.

"I owe you money, don't I?"

"Yes."

"Two thousand, I believe."

"Yes." I hesitated. I'd thought  
about this meeting for days  
now. It was blood money. She  
got out a checkbook this time  
and began writing. "You called  
that hole in the ground a  
grave," I said, "because you  
*knew* it was a grave. Didn't  
you?" The pen stopped.

"You did what I did," I said.  
"You went in the house  
uninvited—into the kitchen.  
You saw the letter from Myron.  
You looked out the window at  
Cleota digging the hole and you  
put it together. The hole was  
for him. You could have saved  
him, Mrs. Patterson."

"Oh?"

"Yes. That's why you  
wouldn't let me return the re-  
tainer, that's why you insisted I  
go on Friday. You knew he was  
coming then and that she  
would kill him. You wanted  
somebody out there while it  
was happening or shortly after  
it happened. You wanted a  
hired witness. You killed a

good man, Mrs. Patterson."

She leaned back in her chair, unruffled. The hand with the pen made that characteristic throw-away gesture. "I had no idea she could do it, or would do it. I thought his coming would break it open. I wanted a confession from her, not a murder."

"Sure. How long you been back in the States, Mrs. Patterson?"

"I told you. I arrived—" She shrugged. She knew I could check it if I had to. "So?"

"You sent him the page from the *Sacramento Bee*, didn't you? Wait. It's not a question. You've been back here long enough to check her out thoroughly, haven't you? You found out about the death of her parents from botulism, you found out about the brother, you set him up, you orchestrated the whole thing. Not a question, Mrs. Patterson, a fact."

She leaned forward. "I didn't think she'd kill him anymore than I thought she'd do to you—what she did. All I knew was that she'd killed my father!"

"And beat you out of his money."

"All right! And beat me out of his money, but my God!"

"What made you so sure he'd come?"

She closed her eyes and leaned back, and sighed. "I waited, but she took her time and my time too. 'You didn't mail that page from the *Sacramento Bee* to him, did you?'" said. "You took it to Arkansas in person."

She sighed again. "Yes. What difference does it make?"

"How did you know he existed?"

"My father wrote me about him when he married Cleota. He said her brother was a Fundamentalist minister in Sampsonville, Arkansas. Father was trying to sell me on her family. I think he was trying to sell himself, too. I think he knew he'd made a mistake."

"So you went down there. Did you tell him who you were?"

"Yes." She lit another one of her French cigarettes. "At first, wasn't going to, but he seemed so honest, so God-driven, that I did. I'd found out more about her by then from the Sampson County records and old news papers."

"I'd found out her folks had died from butolism poisoning seventeen years ago and that she'd won blue ribbons for her canning entries at a half-dozen county fairs. I knew she'd killed my father, Sam, but it was all circumstantial, so I went to him for help. It was the last thing I could think of to do." She shook

her head at the memory. "Lord God!"

"What?"

"He fell to his knees the moment I showed him the notice of my father's death. It was as though I'd hit him with a club. He prayed for ten minutes for Cleota's soul. I just let it run out and then, later, he told me she'd killed their parents, but it couldn't be proved.

"He said everybody knew it, but it couldn't be proved. And then she'd sort of been run out of town and just disappeared. Myron said he'd prayed for her every day since then, but now that he knew where she was, he'd go to her."

"You asked him to?"

"No. I didn't have to. He was eager to go. All he wanted was to save her soul. I think that's all he wanted out of life, Sam."

*Well, maybe he did save it, I thought.* I'd seen her yesterday afternoon in her hospital room. I'd been having trouble believing that a woman and I could have done so much damage to each other and I wanted some doctor to tell me she was an honest-to-God female. We'd said hello to each other, but that was all. Both her hands and half her face were still bandaged, but that cold hard edge had gone from her eyes.

She'd said hello to me and then stared at the ceiling, se-

renely, it seemed to me. At peace, it seemed to me. She'd been a bad seed and Myron a good seed, both from the same pod, and maybe there was a balance in it somewhere. To be weighed on a scale higher than mine. His body for her soul.

I'd wanted to ask Mrs. Patterson if she'd ever seen a grown man die. I'd wanted to rub her nose in it, but I didn't want to anymore. She seemed to fade before my eyes now, a woman of no consequence, fighting for things of no consequence. Money, pride, position. Myron had fought for a soul and maybe he'd won. I'd seen him die for it, and now death seemed of no consequence to me either. There is this other thing, Myron's thing.

I looked at the empty Mrs. Patterson out of my own empty eyes and felt myself drift for a moment, etherialize, transcend. But it passed as it had passed before, as it always passes. This animal cage we're in demands raw meat. Money, power, ego satisfactions, a beaten enemy.

"When did you see him in Sampsonville?" I said.

"Nearly a month ago. He said he'd go to Cleota at once, but he didn't."

She was coming back into focus, her good looks, sharp elegance, that unfinished check on the table. The knife wound

in my leg began to throb again.

"Did you stay there?"

"No. I went back to Reno. I *am* getting a divorce, Sam. Next week, if you're interested. But I spent most of my time at Benson, waiting for him to come. But he didn't, and when I thought he might not at all I went to the Sheriff, thinking I could get him to open it up again, but he refused. Then I went to the farm—just as I told you I did—and saw the letter and the grave. You were right about that. Then I came to you.

"And if Myron hadn't shown up," I said, "you'd have gone back to Baldwin and told him about the poisoning of Cleota's parents."

"But it still would have been circumstantial, Sam."

"Nevertheless, I wish it had gone that way."

"It would've cost you two grand." She smiled.

I sat there for a moment eavesdropping on my aches and pains. It was like listening to a ward full of dying old men. I didn't return her smile. "Finish the check," I said, and she did and shoved it across the table.

We got up together this time, as though in tandem. There was no question about the scampi now, or even the rest of her drink. She put some bills on the table and I trailed her out of the place in silence. The waiter was disgusted again.

Outside in the roar of traffic, I asked her what she was going to do with the farm.

She seemed surprised. "Do you care?"

"I'm curious. You sounded so noble about your father's dream that I wondered."

"I'm going to sell it, Sam. It was his dream, not mine. I've got my own."

"Don't," I said, "tell me what it is."

She got in a cab and headed for Union Square again and I turned and began walking once more toward Lurch, Finger, Pierce and Glean, or whoever they were—and I was thinking that if the week's work had a moral, it was *stay the hell out of the stock market*.

But if one thing doesn't get you in this life, something else will. It remains an unfinished game.



# FINAL COMMITMENT

*Anne was trapped in an affair she could neither condone nor endure. But there was one way out.*

by

DAVID BRADT

HOW RICHARD HAD SO easily convinced her they should see each other again, especially over the dinner she was now preparing, Anne couldn't quite fathom. Perhaps her acquiescence was a testament to his persuasiveness—more likely, however, it indicated that although he was married and had deceived her of that fact, she still loved him. Or thought she did. Lazily stirring the sauce for the stroganoff she had promised him, she noticed that despite its rich odor she could



smell the roses he'd sent her that afternoon.

The vase atop the refrigerator appeared too petite, its neck too slender, to hold the profusion of red roses. Looking at it reminded Anne of watching a frail child struggle with a load too large to carry. Perhaps it would be better to toss out the flowers, unburden the vase and her life of Richard once and for all. She considered the idea and rejected it, absent-mindedly returned to stirring the sauce.

How, she wondered had things gone so wrong. The mental shield she had so carefully forged to fend off the hurt the world offered so readily had been shattered by forces stronger than she could deter.

Now 36, Anne had lived

alone since her last college roommate had taken a job in another city. She remembered only too vividly how unbearable those first years of loneliness had been. Desperately, she had thrown herself into the ever-present social scene. But she soon found herself another victim of the fleeting moment, the quick thrill, all that she instinctively abhorred and had retreated quietly back into her own world.

Not that she was unfriendly. Always affable toward her neighbors and on pleasant terms with her co-workers, Anne enjoyed congenial moments with a variety of acquaintances. But it was her small apartment, where she easily rebuffed either lapses of her will or the iniquitous ways of the world, for which she lived.

Then, suddenly, inexplicably, Richard had appeared, crushing every carefully nurtured defense, leaving her vulnerable to his wishes. A salesman representing a reputable firm her own company dealt with, Anne had taken over his account upon a colleague's retirement.

Before she knew what was happening, business luncheons lingered on extra minutes and were followed by dinner invitations. Initially, she begged off, her firm sense of propriety tell-

ing her that to mix business and pleasure was somehow wrong. Still secure in pleasures more sedate, her books and her music, she was hesitant to step into the strange world of delights that Richard offered so freely.

But his persistence overwhelmed her and soon they shared many evenings together, frequenting the theatre, the ballet, even nightclubs. Then evenings evolved into nights so sweet, so loving, that she held him close even as they slept and, if he minded, he never said so.

Richard was like that—Polite and considerate. As gregarious as she was reserved, witty while she was more profound, he sailed high and she was his anchor. Together they formed a perfect whole. One night Anne whispered that she loved him, and so enraptured was she that she did not notice when he offered no reply.

Then at the office one day, minutes after a sales meeting, Anne's secretary interrupted her while she was still writing up an order for Richard to pick up later.

"Anne?" she said, making it a question.

"What is it, Sally?"

"I think you should know something about Mr. Davis."

"Richard? I can assure you I

already know quite a bit about Mr. Davis."

"Then maybe you already know that he's married."

The slightest notion that Richard was anything but single, of course, had never occurred to Anne. Only in reflection did she perceive her folly—how he'd given her his office phone number because he said he was rarely home, or the fact that they never went to his place due to a roommate who was recovering from an illness and was to be disturbed as little as possible. Roommate, indeed!

When she confronted Richard, he acknowledged he was married as readily as if she'd inquired as to his occupation. And then, extraordinarily calm, he explained that while he was very fond of her, he intended to continue his current marital status, and he was certain she couldn't accept that.

Before she could think of the right words, he picked his coat off the back of the rocking chair she'd bought last summer, and departed. She watched him close the door, and felt as if she'd exhaled all the life from her lungs and could never again summon the strength to breathe in more.

The following day, somehow retaining her composure despite a night haunted by frightening despair, she shifted Richard's

account to another company official. In subsequent weeks she occasionally spotted him in the building. If he approached her, she turned away and said she had an important meeting to hurry off to.

If the days at work proved painful, the nights seemed interminable. Her apartment, once the base of her isolated existence, her fortress of self, seemed as lifeless and empty as she herself felt. Try as she did, she could not revitalize the quiet contentment, the familiar dignified sense that she was directing her life in the best possible way.

Her books and music and lonely meals became mere stopgaps between fits of depression. Richard had given her a taste of the treasures life held and then snatched them away just as she learned to revel in them.

Perhaps that was why, when Richard called and sent the roses, Anne had submitted so readily to his desire to visit her. Maybe just to talk to him would pull her from the depths of her despondency. At best she could hope he'd declare his love for her—as he never had, she now realized—and their affair could resume with the same intensity as before. After all, marriage was not a high priority of hers.

So simple it was to wish, she thought as she relaxed with a small glass of wine from the bottle she'd bought for dinner. To slip into delusions and forget how nonchalantly Richard had cast her love from his mind, as if she had been a successful conquest, a game easily won. Imagination tricked her into calling up instead, the cherished scenes the nights spent in his arms.

Even her disciplined acceptance of reality, although successful in staving off any permanent flights of such fancy, offered little consolation. Slipping back into her old life simply had not worked, and without Richard the future was something to dread at best.

His knock startled her and she hurried to the door. She halted for an instant to compose herself, then drew it open.

He strode in, confident as ever, and kissed her on the cheek as if their troubles consisted of no more than to settle on a restaurant to patronize. He carried a paper bag from which he pulled an expensive bottle of wine.

"Oh, you shouldn't have," Anne said. "I've already bought some."

"Perhaps we'll get to it anyway. Now how are you, Anne? I've missed you so much." He followed her into the kitchen.

When she turned around after setting the wine in the refrigerator he was standing close to her. She rushed heedlessly to him, clutching him as if to see if he were real, taking to her heart the soft words he whispered.

But the moment passed and Anne retreated from his arms until her back touched the cool refrigerator door. The conversation ceased and Richard glanced embarrassedly away as she searched his eyes for the thoughts they held.

"So tell me what you've been up to," he finally said, attempting to break the awkwardness.

"The usual. Working, reading—you know."

"Been seeing anybody else?"

"No." The inclination to pursue another man had never struck her.

"Me either," he said proudly.

She watched him, perplexed. "Are you hungry?" she asked, not sure what else to say.

"As a bear." He walked to the table, away from the tension, and sat in his usual chair as if he'd phoned in a reservation for it. At Anne thought, he had.

She followed him a few steps and then turned back to the kitchen. He seemed different to her. Or maybe it was herself. But when she touched him it was not like before, when it had seemed their very souls



embraced, not just their bodies. From the oven she mechanically pulled out two plates she had heated so the stroganoff wouldn't cool too fast, and heaped a big portion on his plate and a much smaller one for herself.

"Not hungry?" he asked upon seeing her small serving.

"Not very," she said.

"We can wait if you like."

"No, let's go ahead."

They ate in silence for a bit, and then Richard talked about business and later of a revival of an O'Neil play he thought they'd enjoy viewing together. He suggested he pick up a couple of tickets the next day.

"I don't want to hear about plays, Richard," Anne finally pleaded. "What about us? You've said nothing about us."

"I've missed you, Anne," he said earnestly. "Have you missed me?"

"Of course I have, Richard. But do you love me? I must know."

"You know I do. Why do you think I called you? I've been going out of my head without you. Let's consider this settled. You know we love each other." He reached across the table and covered her small hands with his. "Now, tell me what night you'd like to go to the play. It can be our celebration."

"It doesn't matter."

"You must have a preference."

"No, it's up to you. You're the one who has to arrange it with your wife." He didn't catch the invective poorly disguised in her voice, but instead took her mentioning his marriage to mean that it was to be a topic not any longer unrealistically broached.

"No problem," he laughed. "I'll tell her I'm on the road. She'll believe anything." He grinned at Anne as if sealing a conspiracy, but when she didn't reciprocate he withdrew his hand from hers and looked nervously about the table. "Say, it looks like we're out of wine. I'll open up the bottle I brought."

"No, you just sit tight," Anne insisted, picking up both empty glasses. "I'll get it."

Settling back into his chair and lighting a cigaret, Richard offered no resistance. "Great meal, honey," she heard him say as she walked into the kitchen.

Anne opened the refrigerator and lifted out the bottle. She peeled away the foil seal from the neck, removed the cork and filled both glasses. It was, of course, wine of a very good year.

She stood staring at the glasses, a feeling of resolution overtaking her. As she had always

tried to do before, she faced the facts of her situation.

She knew it was over. The life she had developed over the years was shattered in so many pieces that to retrieve each splinter and rebuild was asking far more from herself than she had left to give. It was Richard, she knew, and not herself, who had robbed her of that comfortable life. And her affair with him? It too was of the past, lost in memories increasingly bitter.

She reached behind the tins of spices on the rack over the stove and found the small vial. She could hear Richard talking about business again, how sales with her firm were down, how it sure would help things to move his account back to her. With her fingernails she pulled a tiny cork from the vial and tapped on the end of the slender tube until several drops of clear liquid fell into his glass of wine. She had procured the vial in a dark moment, intending it solely for her own use. But fair

was fair. He droned on but she no longer listened.

Fishing a spoon from the sink, she used the stem to stir the drops and wine together. Ahead, she told herself, refusing again to bow to false hopes, lay a nothingness she did not want to face. She tipped several drops from the vial into her glass, too. She had read that it was tasteless.

Richard, self-assured again, smiled brightly at her when she returned from the kitchen with the full glasses. "Thanks, honey," he said.

She returned his smile and raised her glass to sip the wine. But he abruptly stopped her.

"We need a toast," he said. "A toast to our future together."

Simultaneously they reached their glasses across the table until they met with a barely discernable ring.

There was one consoling fact, Anne thought as they drank. It would end with dignity.

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JUNE, 1977

# RADICAL SOLUTION

*Steve was relieved when the bum left the bookshop. But then the bum came back and died of a bullet in his back. And then Steve discovered that he was marked for execution by a gang of revolutionaries.*

by **KEN LIEBOWITZ**

THE LAST TIME I SAW Hart King in the flesh was in May of '70 at an SDS rally on the Arts Quad at Cornell. I can't recall the subject of his harangue but I do remember it was impassioned, as usual.

The last time I saw Hart, period, was maybe a week ago on the post office wall. Above some mugshots of him it said, "Wanted By The F.B.I.: Harrison Arthur King a/k/a 'Hart King. Sabotage. Destruction of Government Property. Conspiracy. King will reportedly resist arrest and may have acquired firearms. He should be approached with caution."

Caution? That was a laugh. I wasn't cautious, I was just

hungry. Business at the bookstore was slow and at nine-thirty I went over to Smiler's to get a sandwich. The rain drummed against the brim of my cowboy hat and seeped through my boots into my socks.

Coming back, I looked up from puddle spotting when I neared the bookstore and saw this short, stocky character outside, peering through the door. He was wearing a long yellow slicker with the hood up and when he turned towards me his face was framed in yellow. He had a pale complexion, neatly trimmed brown mustache, and the rain glistened on his rimless glasses.



It was Hart King. I don't know if he recognized me but he knew damn well he'd been recognized. Something that might have been fear crawled across his face and he took off down Christopher Street like a hare. I stood there with my mouth open, shrugged, came in out of the rain.

Richie Forrest was on with me that night. He stood behind the counter leafing through his Torts book. Scratching his curly black beard, he nodded and asked me what was up.

"Nothing," I said. "Just met a lot of water, that's all."

Richie grunted and went back to his accident cases. I went into the back room, hung up my hat and coat and joined Richie at the counter. I unwrapped my sandwich and was about ready to take a bite when I noticed this skinny lowlife in a gray gabardine coat hanging out by the poetry section.

It looked as if the rain had been his only contact with water in weeks but even the storm hadn't washed the grime

out of the stubble on his face. I wondered if I could compute his age by counting the layers of dirt on his neck. I nudged Richie with my elbow and pointed at him with my nose.

"What's going on?" I said. "Is this Sell-to-the-Scrofulous Week?"

Richie laughed. "He's got your eyes, red and beady. I figured he was related."

"My eyes only get that way when I'm stoned."

"You *should* be stoned, then run out of town on a rail."

I groaned, and said, "Is this guy a new regular like the Spaced Cowboy?"

"I've seen him a few times," Richie said, running his fingers through his Brillo-like hair, "I guess he started coming in while you were down in Florida, visiting your folks."

"I'd say you're getting soft, Richie. That guy's a candidate for this year's shoplifter poster boy."

"I've watched him," Richie said. "He's not a lifter."

"Yeah? No doubt he's an eccentric philosophy major. All right, he can stay a while longer. I guess I'm getting soft too."

I did some thinking about Hart while I ate my sandwich. I'd met him sophomore year, when he was a graduate assistant in a government class of

mine, and we got on pretty well considering he thought me a political Visigoth. We even had lunch a few times. After graduation, my contact with Hart was limited to news of him via the media.

For several years there were pictures of bombings attributed to him, then rumors he'd been disowned by most of the underground, then nothing. Maybe he'd reformed, I didn't know. I did know that there wasn't a compelling enough reason for me to call the police. It was none of my business. Anyway, I liked that rationale better than thinking I was afraid.

I finished the sandwich and blotted the grease from my moustache. I had just lit a cigarette when a gay regular with short hair and a close-cropped beard came in, looking for Tennessee William's memoirs. He didn't seem too wilted and told me the rain had let up. I smiled at Richie and suggested he ask El Scuzzo to leave.

"You let him in" I said, "and besides, I just ate."

Richie sighed and went over to talk to the stray. Words were exchanged and Richie ushered him out. Holding his nose editorially, Richie picked up some slips and drifted away from the counter to check stock. On the radio, someone finished

a spiel and put on *Born To Run*.

The door whined and rattled as somebody pushed against it. I looked over in time to see the bum's face flatten against the glass. The door opened and he squeezed inside. His eyes were seared with pain. He staggered into the Dover coloring books and bounced off their metal rack towards the counter. One hand was clutched to his middle, the other out for balance. Blood oozed between his fingers. He lurched against the counter, then collapsed and a stack of Castaneda tumbled down and covered him like a shroud.

I stood dumfounded for a second, then ran around the counter. As I bent over him, the bum grabbed my vest and pulled me down. His breath stank like a Times Square toilet. The best he could manage was a grunt. Suddenly his head thwumped against the floor and he lay very still. I looked up to find Richied standing over me.

"He's dead," I said, getting to my feet. "Lock the door, pull the shade, herd the customers to the back of the store."

I took a deep breath and quickly pulled the rubber rain mat out from under the body and covered it. I fumbled a cigarette to my mouth and lit it

with an unsteady hand. Two drags later, I called the police. Richie came back and asked what they'd said.

"About what you'd expect. They're on the way, don't touch anything, don't let anyone leave. Oboy. Looks like we'll corner the ghoul trade for the next few days."

The first cop to arrive was Vic Scarsello, a Village institution for fifteen years. His sad eyes looked out over a prodigious nose and black mustache. After a few quick questions, he sent his partner out to radio for the photographers and the medical examiner. More cops arrived and they questioned the customers while he questioned Richie and me.

"So that's it," he said finally, "you throw the guy out, somebody shoots him, he comes back to die. See anybody suspicious around tonight?"

"This is Sheridan Square," I said, "everybody looks suspicious."

When the Homicide team arrived, we went over our stories again with a burly detective named Dugan, who was a dead ringer for Mr. Potato Face. The customers left and Dugan told us we could go too and they'd lock up for us. We got our coats and said goodnight to Vic. The photographers began taking pictures, filling the store with

bursts of light. It didn't bother the corpse—he didn't even blink.

Outside, the rain had turned to mist. Cops in uniform and plain clothes walked up and down the block, trying to find the spot where the bum was shot. Wherever their flashlights went, the mist turned to diamonds.

Richie and I broke a land speed record crossing the triangular park to the Lion's Head. Three drinks and ten theories later, the best we could come up with was that somebody had disliked the bum enough to kill him. We awarded ourselves the "Firm Grasp of the Obvious Award" and retired the cup. Then we said goodnight and I headed up Seventh Avenue, collar up and hat-brim down against the damp.

There were few cars out and fewer pedestrians. The streets were slick and shining and, as the traffic lights changed color, so did the puddles at my feet. Red lights made the water look like blood. Along the curb, the rain had transformed oil drips into miniature rainbows.

Traffic was heavier up by St. Vincent's Hospital but I caught the rhythm of the lights and scurried across the cement shoals. I made the yellow light at Thirteenth Street and went west towards my apartment.

The block was empty except for a woman walking towards me. Our paths crossed in front of my building and I was halfway down the steps when she called to me.

"I hate to bother you," she said, "but I can't get my car started and I was wondering if you would take a look."

I immediately saw she was someone I'd like to help, even if it meant carrying the car somewhere. She had high cheekbones, a straight slash of a nose, thin lips curled into an embarrassed smile. The yellow turtleneck sweater accentuated the olive cast of her skin and I somehow knew her figure under the long leather coat was a ten out of ten.

I said I'd be glad to help and followed her down the block. The car was a Volvo parked a few doors past the yoga institute. As we came abreast of the car, the passenger door popped open as something jabbed me in the side. I looked down and saw the gun in the girl's hand.

"Get in, Steve," said Hart King from the floorboards. "We've got things to talk about."

It took me a few tries to get my brain in gear. The girl waved her free hand around and gestured at the car. I figured that if they just wanted to kill me I'd be dead already, so I



ight as well go along for the de.

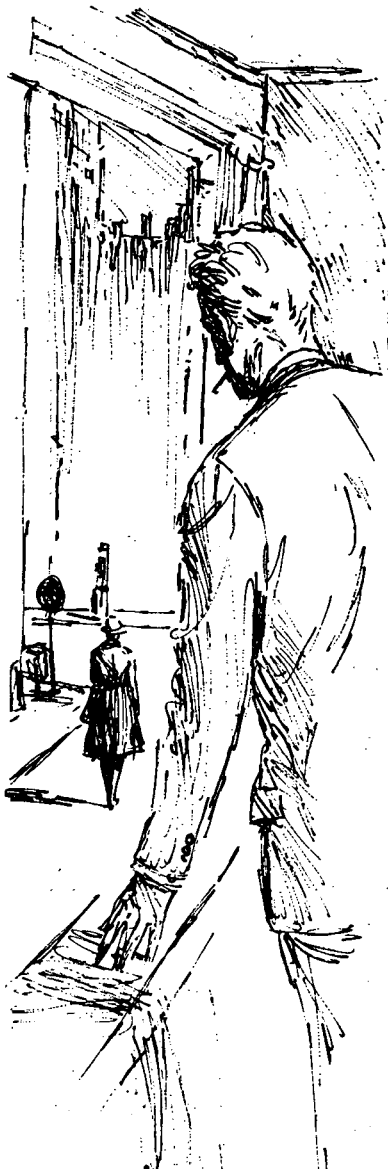
Hart folded the seat down and said, "Sorry about the melodrama but we couldn't take the chance you'd refuse an SVP."

Hart slid over behind the wheel. The girl got in, told me to lie down, covered me with an blanket that had been too long in the trunk. As we pulled away from the curb, Hart said he was the blond mustache and the boy hat that had helped me remember his old friend Steve Heller so quickly. I didn't reply but made a mental note to change my image, assuming I got the chance.

Nobody said anything the rest of the trip. I tried to keep track of the turns so I'd know where we were going, not that I was sure it would do me any good. I kept a tight rein on my car and managed to stay relatively calm. Relative to what, I can't say.

THE CAR NOSED IN towards the curb somewhere downtown on the East Side. Hart opened the door and told me to get out. We were on a narrow empty street lined with blocky factory buildings that cast long shadows in the night.

It looked like a set from a Fritz Lang movie but I knew we were somewhere in Soho.



Soho, half-industry and half-artists living in lofts. Some said it heralded a new Renaissance. I would have settled for anything except the Dark Ages.

Hart unlocked the front door of one of the buildings. We went into a wide hallway cluttered with gutted packing cases. The only light came from a single yellow bulb plastered with dead bugs that hung on a long chain from the ceiling.

At the end of the hallway, a staircase led up to a dark second floor. Next to the stairwell was an old freight elevator with a slatted metal door. Hart rolled it back and motioned us inside. The girl had the gun on me and when Hart got in I decided to do something about it.

"Listen, Hart," I said, "I don't mean to tell you your business but is it really necessary for Rosa Luxembourg here to point that gun at me. It's fairly obvious I'm not going anywhere right now, so unless she hasn't gotten over her penis envy, why don't you ask her to put it away?"

Hart looked at us and smiled. "He's got a point, Becca, you don't need it now, so put it away."

The girl gave me a glance that could have curdled milk and stuffed the gun in her pocket. My round, on points.

Now I could afford to lie back and see what happened.

The elevator was manual operated by a control lever that moved in a half-circle. I watched the way it worked and politely applauded Hart's perfect stop at the fifth and last floor. Hart nodded and I followed him out into a hallway that ran the length of the building. The stairway ended down the hall to the right and there was a door across from as well as one in front of us.

We went through the nearest one into a loft big enough to play regulation football in. Further down the same wall as the door were a sink, two stoves and a doubledoor refrigerator. Back-to-back wooden cabinets separated the kitchen from a large butcher block table surrounded by six rattan chairs.

Against the far wall, four rooms had been partitioned off but they had no ceiling except the main one some thirty feet above. Two big semi-circular couches faced each other in the middle of the room and the entire loft had been split in half width-wise by a folding wooden divider on ceiling and floor tracks.

The place was decorated mostly with plants and there were enough to teach advanced woodcraft. I looked up through the skylight but all I could see

re clouds. Becca switched her n from her coat pocket to her lt and threw the coat on one the couches. I'd been right out the ten-ten figure.

Hart said, "I bet you'd like a ink, Steve. What'll you ve?"

"Scotch and soda, " I said, "ake it a triple."

I dropped my hat and trench-at on top of Becca's and sat wn at the table. She plunked rself in a chair across from e and favored me with either hin smile or a sneer.

"I'm sorry I scared you with e gun," she said. "But I'd tch my mouth if I were you."

"Believe me," I said, "I wish u were."

That was it for snappy patter til Hart came over with my ink and a bottle of wine. He nded me my drink and while

took off his slicker Becca ured the two of them some ne. I sipped scotch and tried look nonchalant. With a lit- practice, I might even have nvinced myself, not to men- n them.

Hart took a seat next to cca and carelessly draped an m around her shoulders. He as wearing a nubby brown rdigan over a work shirt and rduroy slacks. Except for the atched set of bags under his es he looked much the same he had in college.

He said, "You're probably wondering what this is all about, Steve. I don't blame you. I'd be a little confused if I were you."

"Everybody wants to be me," I said. "I didn't realize I had become an idol of millions."

"Some things don't change," Hart said. "You're still quick with a quip, so to speak."

Hart was coming on with heavy bonhomie and just a dash of earnestness. I recog-nized it as his discussion group persona, the one that made light of the Socratic method but definitely had a Message to get across.

"I thought you were destined to be a lawyer," he said. "What were you doing in a bookstore?"

"I'm in temporary retire-ment," I said, "I didn't like the job I had, so I figured I'd take a little time off while I decided what to do next. Speaking of which, why don't we stop crap-ping around and talk turkey. What you want to know is whether I told the cops I saw you. What I want to know is whether you had anything to do with that bum who got wasted in the store tonight."

"Tommy Tozier, you mean? Yeah, I had something to do with that."

I put down my drink and stared at him. "That bum was Tommy Tozier, your old Cornell

comrade? The informer? Come on, Hart, I knew Tozier. Not well, maybe, but I knew him. He was a big, good looking specimen. That yo-yo in the store tonight couldn't have been him."

"I guess you could say guilt and booze spoiled his appeal. Believe me, Steve, that was Tozier."

"Why'd you kill him? He looked like a swift suicide to me. Why bother yourself with him? Revenge bug got you that bad?"

Hart shook his head. "Nothing as pedestrian as that, I'm afraid. It was a warning. You read the papers, don't you? This is our way of letting those Nazis in the government know that we're not going to put up with their repression anymore. Don't you understand, what happened in Chile, in Spain and Portugual, is happening here, too. Somebody's got to stop it."

"I thought you believed in organizing."

"I did once, but the only thing people listen to these days is killings and bombings and that's what they're going to get."

"That's just great," I said. "Five thousand years of human history to choose from and the best you can come up with is more killing. Swell! You do what they do but you're right

and they're wrong and that makes it okay, right? You want to know the truth, Hart, you make me sick."

Silence settled over the room like dusk. I thought I heard some boards creaking behind me, as if someone was changing position. My stomach started to feel queasy. How many of them were there?

Hart said, "Did you tell the police you saw me?"

Fortunately I'd given them one some thought and my answer came out smooth and truthful. Don't misunderstand me, I would cheerfully have lied if I saw any advantage in it but I couldn't.

"Nope," I said. "I didn't say a word and I'll tell you why, too. Assume I did, and they call you and I testify and you go to jail. Fine, that takes care of you. The only thing is that I have to spend the rest of my life wondering who took my footsteps behind me because I wouldn't like that. So Hart, buddy, it all comes down to fear and fear's a much better guarantee for you than political commitment. Fear stays with you longer, right?"

Becca leaned back in her chair and smiled. Hart smiled too. I made it unanimous.

"Good," I said, "It's all settled. I'll finish my drink and you can drive me home."

Hart said, "You should have stayed a lawyer, Steve, you got a great closing argument. Unfortunately, it's not that simple. Sure, you say you won't talk now but what about later. What happens when our winter offensive starts?"

"Winter offensive?" I said. "That's very catchy. I wish *I'd* thought of that. Does that mean you folks are about to lay some bombs on everyone?"

"That's *it*," said a voice from behind me. "We're going to celebrate the bicentennial of Brandywine and Saratoga with a little thunder of our own. American Revolution Two and everyone's invited."

I casually turned around in my chair. Two women and the man who had just spoken marched toward us from one of the shadowed rooms. I recognized two of them. The tiny blonde with the plucked eyebrows and moonlight complexion was Abigail Donner, late of Boston. Along with a few bombings, she was wanted for the Bookline bank robbery in '73.

The tall chap with the Zapata mustache was Ted Klein, hero of the Columbia uprising in '68. Klein was also in on the Brookline job and killed a guard during the course thereof.

I didn't know who the other girl was but she had to be somebody to be with this group.

She had plain features, a lumpy body, and all she did that night was dab at her nose with a flowered handkerchief. I guess you don't have to be a Weatherman to know which way your nose blows.

I wiped my hands on my jeans. The sweat darkened them from blue to navy. By that time, it had occurred to me there was a good chance I wasn't going to walk away from this one. It was a little hard to accept that on an emotional level. After all, I hadn't done anything except be in the wrong time. Was that all it took to become a corpse?

I forced my lips up into a smile and turned to Hart. "What's this all about?" I said. "It doesn't mean what I think it means, does it?"

Hart gave me a sorrowful look, pregnant with regret. He wrinkled his forehead and spoke in a soft voice but his eyes were as friendly as a guillotine.

"I'm sorry about this, Steve," he said. "I really am. We don't have a choice, that's the problem. This isn't kid stuff like it was at Cornell. Taking over buildings is peanuts compared to this. Our lives are on the line and there's too much for us to do to take a chance on you. Sorry."

The five of them stared at me

with nothing on their faces. I could see them killing Tozier or the Brookline bank guard with that same emptiness in their eyes, the rightness of their cause shielding them from the reality of what they were doing. Little muscles started to do the Hustle all over my face.

I clenched my teeth hard enough to crack a walnut but it didn't help. I could feel stomach juices tickling the back of my throat. My hand went to my mouth and I announced I was going to be sick.

Hart led me across the room to the john. I fell to my knees and stuck my head in the bowl. After two dry heaves, everything left in my gut sprayed against the porcelain. Hart flushed the toilet and squeezed my shoulder. He said he was sorry but that every war had its casualties and there was nothing personal involved.

"*Nothing personal?*" I shouted. "You'd better *believe* it's personal. If there's anything after death, Hart, anything at all, I'll be back for you."

Then I began to cry.

Hart shrugged and left me alone in the bathroom. Through the closed door, I could hear snatches of conversation. No doubt they were planning the niceties of my demise and thought it bad form to let me in on the details.

I put my back up against the wall and hung my head between my knees. Hyperventilating helped me calm down a little. But as soon as I remembered where I was and what was going to happen, I could smell the fear under my arm and taste it mixed with bile in my mouth. I rocked back and forth and moaned a dirge to myself.

Then, from somewhere heard a calm voice—my voice—asking me if this was the way I wanted to die.

Long seconds passed. The fear didn't go away—that was asking too much—but somewhere I found the will to float above it. I wasn't dead yet and that meant I had a chance if I was smart enough to see it and quick enough to take it. If not well, nobody lives forever.

I heard footsteps coming towards the door and immediately slumped forward. When Hart opened the door, I had my head between my knees and was sobbing. He helped me to my feet and led me back into the other room. I scaled down the sobbing as we neared then but kept my head down and shoulders hunched.

"No sense wasting time," said Abigail Donner. "We might as well get it over with. It'll be easier on all of us."

"*It.*" What a marvelous word

Usually you hear "it" in relation to sex—"Did you do it?" Now "it" was a substitute for the dirtiest four-letter word of all—kill. Someday, I'll have to write a monograph on the subject, someday.

ABBY WENT TO the front closet and slipped on a pea coat. She transferred a small automatic from the back pocket of her jeans to the side pocket of the coat. She was smiling.

Ted Klein pushed his chair back from the table and slowly stood up. He was too macho for a coat and put on a black turtleneck sweater instead. I could see the bulge of his revolver under the sweater. He saw me looking at it and said in a deep voice, "I don't need a gun to handle you, little man. Give me any trouble and all it means is they'll find some funny bruises on your body. Assuming the fish leave much for them to go on."

The girl with the cold went over to the refrigerator and poured herself some orange juice. She didn't turn around as she drank it. I glanced over at Becca but she wouldn't look at me.

Hart cleared his throat and said, "You got a big mouth, Klein. There wasn't any need for that."

Klein sneered. "If you had

any guts, King, you'd do the job yourself, him being your buddy and all. But you don't, so shut up."

Klein threw me my hat and coat. I left the coat unbuttoned to give me more freedom of movement and slapped my hat on my head. I had left my cigarettes on the table, so I went over to get them. My lighter was on top of the pack and, after fiddling with it a bit, I dropped it in my pocket. Klein took me by one arm and we followed Abby into the elevator.

We stood in the elevator in size places: Abby on the left working the controls, me in the middle, Klein to my right and a little behind. As Abby threw the lever, I took out my cigarettes and offered one to Klein. He said it was against the law to smoke in elevators but he'd make an exception this time.

Klein curled his lip around the cigarette and leaned forwards. My lighter clicked twice, then caught. A jet of flame burst out of the nozzle into Klein's face. His mustache and left eyebrow shriveled up and he let out a glass-shattering scream.

I had no time to waste on Klein. Pivoting on my left foot, I smashed the knife edge of my hand into Abby's throat before she could get out her gun. She staggered back against the wall

and the gun clattered to the floor.

I spun back around and ducked under Klein's punch. My knee thudded into his groin. He wheezed in pain and when he bent over I hit him on the jaw with the point of my elbow. When he hit the floor I was ready with a boot in his ribs.

Abby was on the floor, clawing at her throat. Her head rolled from side to side and her heels drummed against the floor. The elevator hit bottom and I quickly pulled the lever towards me. The adrenaline firing my muscles suddenly switched off and my knees gave like boiled spaghetti. The inside of my head ebbed and flowed like the tide.

Voices screamed down from the top of the shaft. I bent over and picked up the two guns. To run or not to run, that was the question. Run where? Could I find a phone before they found me? Then what? More running?

If any of them got away I'd have to run forever. That was no way to live. Screams still ricocheted down the shaft. I listened and the screams became words and the words were about what'd you'd expect.

"Come on down," I said in as deep a voice as I could manage, "Abby's hurt. You'd better come down."

"Bring the elevator back up."

"I can't—it's busted."

"We're on our way."

The elevator rested on the bottom of the shaft, maybe four feet below the ground floor. I rolled back the door and climbed out. Klein was still doubled up, moaning like an asthmatic ape.

Abby wasn't making gagging noises anymore. Her lips were shiny with spittle and the tip of her tongue protruded from her mouth. There was a blueish tinge to her face, a blush gone bad. I tried to feel guilty or sorry or even sick but I didn't have the time.

Footsteps echoed down the stairs and they were getting closer. I picked up an empty packing case and piled it on top of two others resting against the wall about fifteen feet from the stairs. I crouched down behind them and thumbed back the hammer on Klein's revolver. I hoped I wouldn't have to use it.

Hart bounced off the wall on the landing and ran down the rest of the stairs two steps at a time. He reached out for the handrail and swung around the staircase. He couldn't stop his momentum and crashed into the wall next to the elevator. Becca and the other girl were ten steps behind Hart. They stopped at the bottom of the



stairs and caught their breath. Becca's gun was in her hand I took a deep breath, let it out slow, and popped up over the crates.

"Nobody move! Drop the gun, Becca, and nobody's going to get hurt!"

Three heads turned my way. The dim yellow light made their faces look like death masks. Klein's head suddenly appeared behind the slatted door and, as my eyes flickered his way, Becca raised her arm and started firing. One bullet thudded into the packing cases and another whined past my ear. My gun seemed to fire of its own volition. The first shot went wide and caught Sniffles in the shoulder.

She spun around and collapsed. Becca continued to fire. I sighted along the barrel and squeezed off three shots. One of them hit Becca in the chest. It knocked her off her feet and flung her up and back. She slid down three stairs, her heels clicking on each step.

"*Omigod!*" screamed Hart and ran over to Becca. He knelt down and cradled her in his

arms. He kept saying, "No," over and over again but it didn't change anything. I came around the crates and stood next to him. My shadow fell across Becca's face, so I stepped back and looked at the other girl.

Her breathing was shallow and her eyes stared at the cob-webbed ceiling. Her pulse fluttered like a butterfly trapped in a fist. I said, "Hart, listen to me. I'm going to call for an ambulance. You just stay here and take care of Becca, okay?"

Hart nodded and blinked tears down his cheek. "Of course I'll stay," he said. "There's no place to go, is there?"

"No," I said, "not for any of us."

I walked through the shadows and out the front door. The wind blew yesterday's newspapers down the street like tumbleweeds. Clouds floated past the moon and in the distance new thunder boomed in the sky. There wasn't even a glimmer of pink on the horizon. It was going to be a long time before dawn.



# DOUBLE

# DECOY



*Mahoney couldn't believe he had killed Susan. But he knew exactly how he could get away with her murder. Or did he?*

by  
**HERBERT  
HARRIS**

THERE WAS NO PITY in his eyes when he looked down at the girl he had strangled. This was a bit out of character for Terence Mahoney.

By nature he was a soft sentimentalist, as so many of the Irish are. If he had been in love with Susan, his handsome blue

Irish eyes might have filled with tears at the sight of the blonde lying there like a broken doll.

But he had really and truly hated her at the moment when his savage temper got the better of him. After all, she had represented the great insurmountable obstacle that could prevent him from realising his dream.

"I'll see that you never marry that girl," Susan had told him, her green eyes dangerous, her reddish-gold hair falling wildly about her angry face.

"And how will you stop me, darling?"

"By telling her the truth about you and me!" she had

snarled at him. "Maybe your precious little Moira would like to hear about the baby I nearly had. . . how you paid somebody to get rid of it!"

"You wouldn't dare tell her!"

"Wouldn't I? Listen, Terry, a girl will fight dirty for a fellow she wants to keep. If you leave me for that deb, I'll blow the gaff. . . I'll tell Moira everything. . . do you hear?"

Terence Mahoney had never encountered a girl quite like this one. She was neurotic, of course. She had taken their affair too seriously all along. He had sensed she could spell trouble.

Plenty of girls had run after him. As a movie actor with excessively good physique and dark handsome looks, the attraction was irresistible, and some of the little bitches had pestered him until he succeeded in shaking them off.

Susan was not to be shaken off, though. She cast a frightening shadow over a tremendously good marriage prospect.

Moira had fallen hard for him—an auspicious event beyond his wildest expectations. An heiress, the daughter of a rich man who doted on her.

And Daddy was not merely rich. His money controlled a film-production company which was now—surprise, surprise—about to launch his daughter's

fiance as a new dashing, adventurous hero in the Errol Flynn tradition.

*"I'll tell Moira everything! . . . everything!"*

The words had cut deeply into him like the teeth of a saw. Then, in his blind rage, he had seized her throat in his strong hand. He hadn't realised how fierce the pressure of his fingers had been until Susan was dead. . .

For a long time he just stood staring down at her, his face empty and his mind blank. Then he left her small flat and walked into the street, and recalled that very soon her elder sister Kay would be dropping in on Susan and would find her, and after that the whole world would know. . .

As soon as the body was found, the inevitable hue and cry started up. They would look for *him*, that was certain. The number One Suspect. Susan's sister Kay knew all about them. . . what had happened about the baby. Of course, she would have told the police everything.

He knew he was wanted, that they'd be hunting for him, that he must keep out of sight. Mahoney fought back a feeling of panic. He mustn't lose his head, that would be disastrous. He had to think clearly, to plan with cunning and finesse. . .

He reckoned that if he could manage to get to Ireland, he would be all right there. In the wilder and more remote areas, he could just fade into anonymity, lie low for a bit while he grew a beard and assumed a new identity. . .

Some of his boyhood friends—like Paddy Lisburn and Sean Tarbet and Kevin O'Boyle, and other members of the youthful gang to which he had belonged before he got that small part in a film—would see that he was okay.

But to get to Ireland. . . that could be damned tricky now. They would have guessed that he'd be making a bee-line for there. They would have their blokes out keeping close watch on the sea and air exits. They would have pictures of him—there were plenty of those at the studio—and as soon as they clapped eyes on him trying to leave the country, they would pounce. . .

Then he wondered about Bill Randall. Randall was invariably hard up, thanks to the horses and the booze and the women, and always pleased to pick up some easy money: he didn't care what he had to do to earn it either.

How much would he want? A hundred nicker? Two? Five? Well, five hundred would be a real inducement, and Mahoney

knew he could run to that all right. . .

Randall was slightly tight when Mahoney called on him. Booze was perhaps his worst failing. But for his unreliability he might have won some success as an actor.

But just recently the only work he had been able to get in the entertainment business was playing "double" for Terence Mahoney. Randall would take risks as a "double" on movie locations. Maybe he would take another risk now. . . for more dough. . .

The men looked like identical twins when they sat facing each other in Randall's rather sleazy bed-sitter. The same build, the same darkly handsome looks.

"If you'll help me," Mahoney began bluntly, "there's five hundred nicker for you. Sorry I can't be more generous, but how does that appeal?"

"You must be joking," the double said, sniggering.

"No," Mahoney said. "I want you to take a trip to Ireland. You can go by boat or by 'plane or any way you like. So long as you try to get out of the country, that's the only thing that matters."

Randall lit a fresh cigaret from the one burning in his mouth and stared muzzily at his caller. But if his expression

was vague, the whisky hadn't entirely dulled his brain.

"I'm supposed to be *you*, old sport. . . is that the idea?" He blinked through the blue fog of tobacco. "Do you think it'll work?"

"Look, Bill," Mahoney said, "we're so damned alike that people on the film set have constantly mistaken us for each other. For the purpose of the exercise I have in mind, *you* are *me*. . . and you will walk straight into a police ambush."

"Charming," Randall grinned stupidly.

"You'll be arrested and swept unceremoniously away in a car, probably with a blanket thrown over your head to foil the cameramen. You won't have a chance to say anything much at this stage, so you'll not have much to worry about."

"And later?"

"You'll protest your innocence. Wrongful arrest and all that lark. Well, what can they charge you with?—trying to take a trip to Ireland? After all, you can't *help* being my double, can you?"

"And after they've whisked me away, that leaves the field clear for you—is that it?"

"Sure." It was Mahoney who smiled now. "There won't be any police watching that particular exit any more. You'll have drawn them off. And that,

my dear Bill, is when *I* leave for Ireland."

Randall blew tobacco smoke out slowly, thinking. "Five hundred nicker. . ." He savoured the words as if they were mouthfuls of scotch. "I like the sound of that, sport, as you said. . . Okay, let's have the full briefing then. . ."

A wave of relief swept over Mahoney. This was great, easier than he'd hoped for. Once the police had taken Randall away, there would be nobody there to stop him boarding the 'plane, and some ninety minutes later he'd be touching down on Irish soil.

"Thanks, Bill," he said, and felt for his notecase.

There was a slight autumnal nip in the air when Bill Randall got to the airport for the Irish 'plane. He wore the type of chunky car-coat and heather-mixture tweed trilby that Mahoney usually wore, making the likeness even more noticeable.

Randall knew he would never reach the tarmac on which the Irish 'plane stood waiting. It was, in fact, no surprise at all when the detectives closed in. There were no fewer than three of them, he noticed.

There was a girl with them, too, he saw. A girl with reddish gold hair and very pale, tired-looking face. Randall, who had

never seen Susan or her sister Kay, wondered who she was. A girl member of the C.I.D. maybe?

He was hustled off quickly to a waiting police-car. The girl was right beside them. Her pale face looked earnest, and she was talking to one of the C.I.D. men.

Then a cameraman came from nowhere, and the blanket was thrown over his head and he was bundled into the car, just as Mahoney had said would happen. Everything working like a dream. He was earning his five hundred nicker all right...

Mahoney observed the whole operation from a pre-selected vantage-point, far enough away to be out of danger, but near enough to watch the progress of the plan.

Oh, yes, it was all going very smoothly. It had been a real inspiration. He smiled with real satisfaction as the police-car disappeared round the corner. So that was that. The watchers departed. Now the clear field...

About ten minutes later, within yards of the plane that was to take him to what he thought to be freedom, Terence

Mahoney, the handsome Irish boy they were grooming for stardom, was seized firmly and roughly by four strong arms, much stronger arms than his.

"My God, what's this!" he exploded.

Then they told him. That he was wanted for questioning in connection with the murder of a girl named Susan Morton. And through the mist that seemed suddenly to cloud his eyes he saw Susan's elder sister Kay. Her face was grim and merciless.

"That was a clever trick, getting us to arrest your double," one of the C.I.D. men said to him. "You might have got away with it if it hadn't been for this young lady here... Miss Morton, the dead girl's sister."

Mahoney grimaced at him.

"Your double Bill Randall is a chain smoker," the detective went on. "Fingers stained as brown as mahogany. Miss Morton thought that was queer. She knew your fingers were as white as milk, that you'd never smoked a fag in your life. And she knew you were Ireland-bound and would go there now if you could. Come on, then, let's get cracking..."



# DADDY'S

# LITTLE

# GIRL

*Garson thought O'Brien talked too much. But the Organization had a very different idea about it.*

by

**WILLIAM E. CHAMBERS**



BART GARSON LEANED BACK in his recliner, sipped a martini and read the headlines of his evening newspaper with satisfaction. The body of a young hood named Joe Briesi had been found slumped in a car beneath the Kosciusko Bridge in Brooklyn. He had been shot twice in the head, gangland style.

Garson let the paper slide off

his lap onto the floor while he stared at the flames dancing in his huge fireplace and muttered, "Good work, Frankie. Good—"

A sudden commotion snapped him away from his thoughts. His daughter's voice, high pitched, practically hysterical, pierced the thick oak door of his den. A male voice, lower, placating, could also be heard.

Sighing deeply, Garson downed his martini, rose reluctantly and shuffled across the room.

He yanked the door open with a meaty hand and said, "What's going on here?"

The young couple in the hall turned to face him. Frank O'Brien's lean face was flushed. Needlessly adjusting his tie, he said, "G-good evening, Mr. Gar—"

Lydia Garson's brown hair swirled about her shoulders as she threw off her mink stole and said, "Good evening, *hell!*"

"What's the matter, Sugar?" Garson asked, hoping his daughter's deep breathing wouldn't make her pop out of the low cut evening dress she had on.

"Don't *Sugar* me, you murderer!"

Garson's face flamed as he looked past his daughter to her companion. O'Brien seemed to shrink inside his suit. He started to speak but Lydia cut him short.

She said, "Don't look at *him*, Daddy! Look at *me!*"

Grasping the lapels of her father's silk smoking jacket, she stood up on her toes, pressed her face to his and said, "You murdered Joe Briesi!"

Garson answered in a calm, almost amused, tone. "I'm glad it's the maid's night off. You know how she loves gossip."

"I hope the police love gossip, Daddy, because that's where I'm going!"

Lydia released her grip and started down the hall. Two steps later, her arm was firmly in Garson's grasp. He said, in a tone that was soft, yet serious, "Into the den, young lady. This is your father talking."

Lydia's mouth opened, but when her eyes met his she nodded mutely. Garson ushered them both toward the well stocked, octagon shaped bar on the far side of the room. They sat on the plush leather stools while he mixed three martinis. A full moon cast silver rays through the picture window behind him. Ocean waves crashed against the rocks fifty feet below his house. Handing each a drink, he raised his own and said, "Tranquility."

Garson swallowed half his drink and O'Brien followed suit. Lydia ignored hers. Finally, Garson looked into her eyes and asked, "What's your problem?"

She met his gaze and said, "Did you or did you not murder Joe Briesi?"

"I did not."

Lydia glanced at O'Brien, looked back at her father and said, "You're a better murderer than a liar—that's for sure."

Garson plunked his martini glass down and said, "Where



he hell are you getting these options?"

Lydia's thumb nearly struck O'Brien in the face.

"Him!"

Garson's stare devoured the younger man. O'Brien shifted nervously and said, "I—it slipped out. Accidentally, Mr.—"

"Accidentally?" Garson's voice was a purr. "What slipped out accidentally?"

"She knows I—you ordered it. I mean—"

Garson laughed innocently. "I don't know what in hell you mean."

"We—uh—stopped over in Bronson's for a nightcap and I met Terry Sanders. We had a few drinks and started to reminisce about the business. I mean Bronson's is one of our places—you can talk freely."

"Get to the point."

"Well, Lydia had been playing shuffleboard with Sanders's girl while we were talking. Sanders was bragging about the time he hit Jimmy Forbes and I tried to top him by telling about how I wasted Briesi. I didn't realize that Lydia had come back for a drink and overheard this."

"Daddy, you never liked Joe." Lydia cut in. "You always tried to stop me from dating him. What happens if I start dating Frankie regularly? Going to hit me, too?"

"So *that's* it." Garson shook his head. "You think he was hit because of you."

"I'm sure he was hit because of me."

"Oh, don't be silly. Sure, I didn't like him. But if I was that anxious to split you two up, I would have asked the Tribunal to steer him away from you. Except for a few rare instances, the Organization has always considered a father's word to be law where his family's concerned. You know that."

Doubt crossed Lydia's face. She said, "Then why . . . why was he murdered?"

"He wasn't murdered. He was executed. I explained the difference between murder and execution to you a long time ago."

"Yes, but—" She ran out of words.

"No buts. Ordinarily, I'd say the matter is closed. But since big-mouth here spilled the beans, I guess, I'd better explain. Joe Briesi was holding back on his narcotics take. He stole from the Organization. You know the punishment for this."

"Execution."

"Right. You know all about our loyalty oath. Part of that oath is that you never harm a fellow Organization member unless it's sanctioned by the Tribunal. You know I've always lived honorably by that oath."

That's why your attitude surprises me."

"I—I liked Joe a lot and I guess I lost my head." Lydia smiled and squeezed her father's hand. I'm sorry, Daddy."

"Okay, Baby."

Her smile widened as she glanced at O'Brien and said, "When I became old enough to realize Daddy wasn't in a normal business like my other classmates' fathers, he sat me down and explained how he supplied whatever people wanted but couldn't have because of stupid, uptight laws."

"That's right," Garson said. "I also explained how execution is just as legitimate a punishment for crime within the Organization as it is within society itself."

"I've always been proud of the fact that Daddy helped found the Organization," Lydia said. "Knowing all this, I suppose I shouldn't have gotten riled when I heard you talking, Frankie."

"Your reaction was natural, I guess, since I didn't know why Joe was ordered hit and couldn't give you an explanation." Relief was evident in O'Brien's voice. "Just forget it ever happened."

"You'd better have a short memory, too." Garson warned. "The Tribunal might not like

the idea of an enforcer with loose tongue."

GARSON SMILED and waved at the bartender as he walked through the door and saw O'Brien seated at the round table with three other men. Closing the door behind him, he said, "Good afternoon, gentlemen."

O'Brien nodded gravely. The three men beside him rose to their feet and smiled. A bushy-haired man with a walrus mustache pumped Garson's hand with both of his own and said "Bart, it's good to see you."

"Good seeing you, Angelo."

Next to Angelo was a dapper white-haired man. He also shook hands warmly and said "Bart, I hardly ever see you anymore."

"Doremus, what can I say?"

The third man, who was sandy haired and had the build of a wrestler, swallowed Garson's hand in his and said "Doremus is right. You should try to spare some time for old friends."

"You're right, Pete. I'll have to take stock of myself."

"Sit down." Pete motioned to a chair, then snapped his fingers. A waiter magically appeared. "A bottle of the best chianti and four glasses."

"Yes, sir."

Aside from O'Brien, everyone

made small talk until the wine was served. Then they toasted Garson's health. After the waiter left, Garson said, "I know you didn't summon me to make toasts. What's up?"

Angelo tugged at his mustache and said, "Right to the point as always, eh Bart?"

"Naturally."

"Best way." Pete said. "Frankie informed us of your little episode last night with Lydia."

"So?" A gleam entered Garson's eyes as he looked at O'Brien. "What's the big deal?"

Doremus answered him. "The big deal is Lydia knows too much. She's a threat to every one of us, Bart."

"A threat?" Garson laughed but his eyes were serious. The others remained poker faced. Finally, he said, "You must be joking."

"No joke." Angelo seemed to be tying a knot in one corner of his mustache. "She's a threat."

"Oh, come off it!" Garson thumped the table with his fist. "She's known all about my business for years. You guys think your kids don't know? They don't have TV and radio and read newspapers?"

"Sure they do." Pete said. "But they don't know the particulars. They haven't got anything to threaten us with."

"Threaten!" Garson pointed to O'Brien. "There's your

threat. Him and his big mouth! Want me to remove the threat? I'll rip his tongue out!"

Garson started to reach across the table but Doremus snapped, "Bart! Control yourself!"

"I'm sorry." Garson slumped back in his seat. "Lost my head for a second."

"Seems to be a family trait." Pete said.

"Well, you're talking about my daughter, you know. She's all I've got left since my wife died."

"We know it," Doremus said softly. "I love the girl as much as you do. After all, I stood up for her at the christening."

"That's right, you did. So how can you—"

"Bart." Doremus reached across the table and patted Garson's arm. "Remember our oath? 'To live by the knife and the gun. To hold the Organization sacred above religion, family, government, all things.'"

"Don't tell me the oath. I helped to write up the original draft."

"That's right. So you, above all people, should know that Lydia has to die."

Garson felt woozy. His heart worked overtime. Rubbing clammy hands together, he said, "Lydia's no threat to anybody. She got a little excited but calmed down when I ex-

plained things to her. She'll never act against my wishes."

"Won't she?" Pete asked. "She dated Joe Briesi against your wishes."

Garson waved that off saying, "Infatuation. A crush."

"Disobedience," Doremus said. "Just like in college. Leading demonstrations against the Vietnam War. Bringing your name into the spotlight."

"She finished honorably, didn't she? Became an accountant? She was just young, impressionable. That's all."

"Headstrong," Doremus said. "You always called her Daddy's little girl and you were right. She's the image of you forty years ago when it comes to her actions."

"That's bad? Seems my headstrong ways did a lot of good for the Organization."

"That's just it. You were part of the Organization. She's not. I'm sorry, Bart. We can't take chances."

"You're taking chances with a loudmouth like him!" Garson said, pointing toward O'Brien.

"He's been put on warning. One more slip and he's finished. We're letting him off light because he came clean with us. But as for Lydia—she must die."

Sweat oozed down Garson's face. His hand shook so badly he spilled some wine on his

shirt before draining his glass. Finally, he said, "Please . . . reconsider."

"I'm sorry," Doremus said. "Though it grieves us, we're all in agreement. The judgment is final."

Angelo and Pete nodded. O'Brien said, "Mr. Garson, I'm sorry. I had to come clean. It was my duty."

Garson nodded without looking in O'Brien's direction. The younger man continued, "I'll do the job if you want. It'll be quick and painless."

Garson's face twisted into a horror mask. He said, "Touch my daughter and I'll fix you so you'll beg for death, you—"

"Easy, Bart." Doremus spoke soothingly. "He won't touch Lydia. I'll get one of the other—"

"No!" Garson splashed wine on the table as he filled his glass. Draining it, he said, "I'll do it myself! I brought her into this world. If it has to be, I'll put her out of it."

O'Brien's eyes were downcast while the other three looked sceptical. Pete was first to speak.

"Tell us when, where and how, Bart."

"Tonight. I'll get her to walk with me to the cliff behind our house. She likes the view and salt air and all. I'll—knock her out fast and throw her off the

cliff. It will look like an accident. She'll hardly even feel it . . ."

SWEAT GLEAMED on Garson's forehead as he paced back and forth before the unlit fireplace. He glanced irritably at his watch and wondered where the hell his daughter was. Lydia said she was going to the movies. She should have been back by now. No movie lasts till one in the morning.

He wondered if . . . No. The Tribunal wouldn't take action until he had a fair chance to do the job first. He caught his breath as he heard a car turn into the driveway.

Garson's first impulse was to run to the door, but he realized the front of the house might be under surveillance, so he remained inside his den. After hearing his daughter enter, he stepped into the hall and said, "Lydia?"

The safari-suited girl smiled, kissed him on the cheek and said, "Who else?"

"Come in here for a second, dear."

Lydia glanced curiously at her white-faced father as he closed the door behind them. She said, "Something wrong?"

"Plenty. O'Brien blew the whistle about last night. The Tribunal thinks you know too much. They say you're a bad

risk for the Organization. They want you hit. I said I'd do it—just to gain time."

"Daddy." Lydia's face seemed to sag. "You?"

"We'll talk later. They might have someone watching the house. We can get away by walking along the cliff's edge until we hit the woods. I've got a car parked a mile down the road. There's two million dollars cash in it. I've arranged transportation to Canada. From there, we'll—"

"Go nowhere!"

Tiny beads of ice covered Garson's body as he turned toward the sound of this new voice. Doremus walked into Garson's den, shaking his head sadly. Angelo and Pete entered next, followed by O'Brien, who was armed with a .45 automatic.

Tears were spilling down Lydia's face when Doremus nodded to her and said, "Show him."

Lydia produced a tiny microphone from inside her jacket and said, "They overheard our conversation, Daddy."

"But . . ." Garson looked baffled. "I don't understand."

"I didn't want to live off your money, Daddy. I wanted to succeed bit on my own—to join the Organization—to be like you . . ."

"Like me?"

"That's right," Doremus said. "She came to us and said she wanted to join. Since she's an expert C.P.A. we figured we could use her to handle our books. Since she already knew about the oath, I said we'd have to test her mettle."

"That's right, Daddy. I had to prove my loyalty to them by putting you in a dangerous situation. All you had to do was agree to let me be hit and it would have been over. When you said you'd do it yourself, they bugged me and waited nearby for my own protection.

I—I was certain you would pass the test, Daddy. But then you tried to chicken out. Oh, Daddy, how *could* you?"

Angelo twisted the end of his mustache and said, "You really disappointed us, Bart."

O'Brien motioned with the .45 and said, "I'll have to ask you to come with me to the cliff, Mr. Garson."

Garson tried to speak but was struck dumb when his daughter said, "Oh, *Daddy!* How could you let me *down* this way? I wanted you to be so proud of me!"



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